

#01

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM





WELCOME TO
AMAGI BRILLIANT PARK!

LATIFAH FLEURANZA
The princess of
Maple Land. She is
AmaBri's manager.

MACARON

The Fairy of Music
and the mascot who
runs Macaron's Music
Theater. Actually,
there's no one inside
the costume.

MOFFLE

The Fairy of Sweets
and the mascot who
runs Moffle's House
of Sweets. There's
no one inside the
costume.

MUSE

The Fairy of Water and
part of the cast of Aquario.

TIRAMII

The Fairy of Flowers
and the mascot who
runs Tiramii's Flower
Adventure. There's
no one etc.

★ I WANT
★ YOU TO
★ BECOME
★ THE
★ MANAGER

★ OF AMAGI
★ BRILLIANT
★ PARK





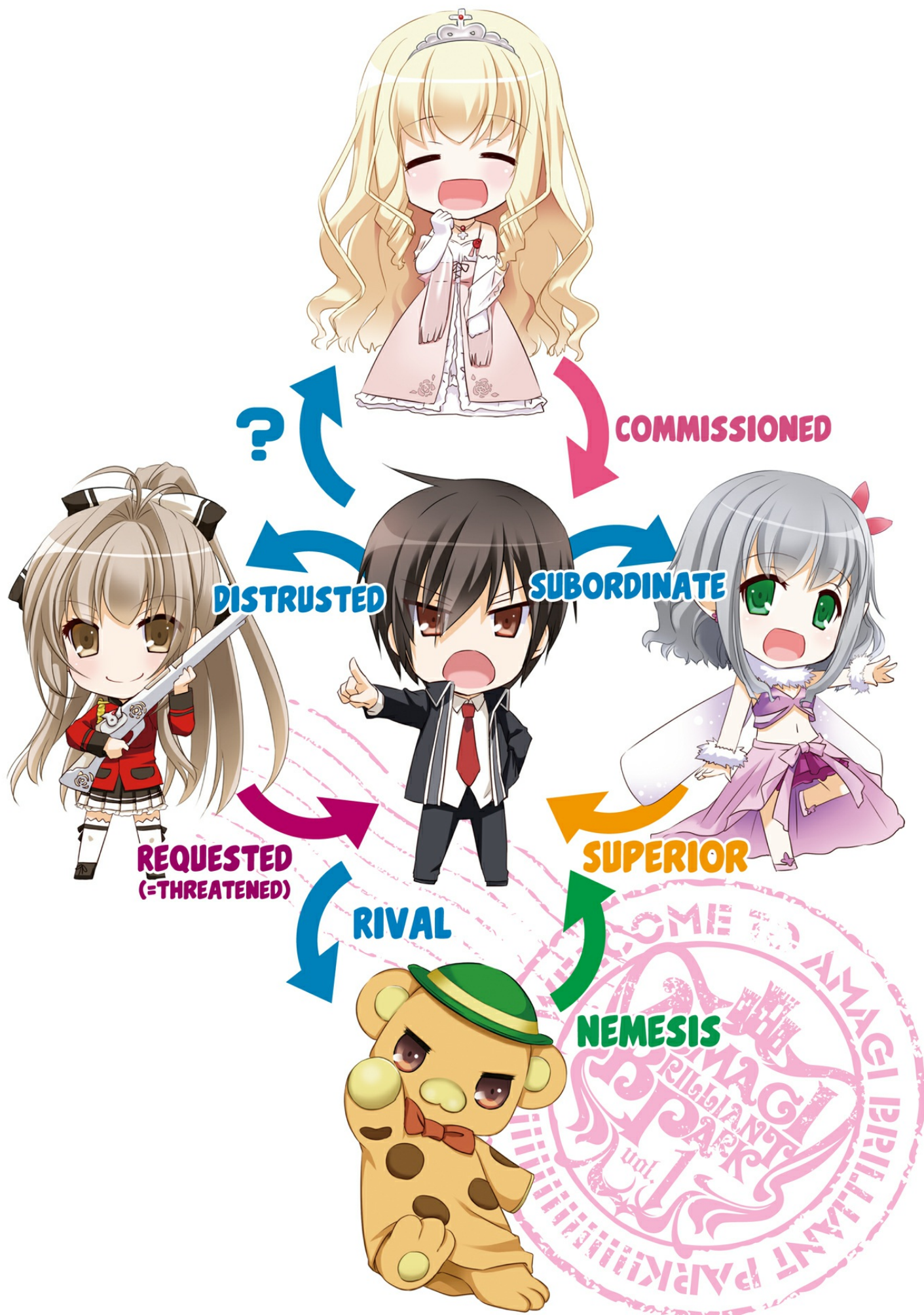


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“This may be a bit sudden, Kanie-kun... But would you join me at an amusement park this Sunday?”

Indeed, it was sudden.

A transfer student he barely knew was pointing an old-fashioned musket at his head in their classroom after school. It was nothing if not “sudden.”

Kanie Seiya froze up for precisely three seconds, then whispered back: “Amusement park?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you yet.”

“And... why the musket?”

“So that you can’t run away.”

It was a beautiful gun, white and lined with intricate metal ornamentation. It should have been quite heavy, yet she held it steadily, muzzle pressed firmly against his head.

The transfer student—Sento Isuzu, wasn’t it? He had a vague recollection of her from the way the other guys in his class talked about her. She was slender, with glossy hair and large eyes; flawless skin; quiet, cold features; and full, soft lips.

She was a faultless beauty (or would be, if not for the musket).

She was the kind of girl any man would jump at the chance to date (or would be, if not for the musket).

It was flattering to have a girl who’d been the talk of the school since her arrival propositioning him (or would be, etc.).

“Ah... First, I want to make sure we’re on the same page on a few things,” Seiya said.

“Proceed.”

“Are you using that weapon and its implied lethal force in an attempt to pressure me—Kanie Seiya—to fulfill your request?”

“Yes,” she affirmed.

“And if I refuse, you kill me?”

“Yes.”

“Your request, then, was ‘join me at an amusement park.’ In other words, you’re asking me on a date, under threat of armed retaliation. Is this interpretation valid?”

Sento Isuzu kept her gaze locked firmly on Seiya and gave him a short nod. “Correct. Your response, if you please?”

“Well, I’ll need to give it some thought...”

A gunshot rang in his ear. The musket ball put a radial fracture in the wall behind Seiya. She fired again, and a second shot pierced the wall. *So it’s not a toy; it’s real? And how can she fire a muzzle-loading gun like that multiple times?* As Seiya stood there, shaken, he felt the hot muzzle press hard against his temple once more.

“Your response, if you please.”

After a pause that felt like forever, Seiya concluded, “...I’ll go.” After all, what choice did he have? What other answer could he give?

He’d been in the third term of his first year of high school when this mysterious, beautiful girl had transferred into his class. She’d been swarmed by guys asking her out from the start, but she’d rebuffed every one of them—to choose, in the end, the honor student, Kanie Seiya.

In theory, he should have been pleased about the situation, but that only applied if the girl in question was normal. The musket was a deal-breaker.

Seiya loved being popular with women; it added to his reputation. But he hated the idea of being tied to any one woman because it clashed with his personal style.

In truth, Kanie Seiya was a narcissist; a tried-and-true egomaniac. Given the circumstances, it was practically inevitable that he would be arrogant: He had a keen mind that put him, academically, at the top of his class. He was naturally handsome, with refinement to spare. He was also incredibly athletic, had a wide array of talents, and could generally succeed at anything he set his mind to.

It was bad enough that whenever he was out in town, if he happened to catch sight of himself in a reflective surface, he'd find himself nonchalantly running his fingers through his hair and telling himself: "Still looking good, Seiya."

If a boy in his class told him, "You're lucky, Kanie. Your grades are so good," he'd respond, "Of course they are. I have a superior mind, after all."

If a girl in his class told him, "Kanie-kun, you're so handsome," he'd respond, "I don't need you to tell me that. It's a well-established fact."

That's why I have no friends and no girlfriend. I'm not lonely, though. Not lonely at all, dammit—for a genius(?) of my caliber, solitude is inevitable.

So why, now, was he—the great and brilliant Kanie Seiya—being forced on a date with a dangerous, unstable woman like her?

1: The Archetypal Awful Dating Spot

Sunday arrived.

Amagi Station on the Toto Line was the meet-up spot that Sento Isuzu had dictated to him. As Seiya passed through the ticket gate, he caught sight of a nearby police box and paused in front of it, considering. A middle-aged patrolman noticed, and addressed him: “Something bothering you, son?”

“No...” Seiya shook his head. For a moment, though, let’s imagine what *would* have happened if he had told the officer what was bothering him: *“This weird transfer student asked me on a date under threat of musket fire! Yes sir, she had a musket. Yes, like the guns from ‘The Three Musketeers.’ They’ve also become rather famous as magical girl weapons these days. Please, you have to arrest her!”*

There was no way he would have been taken seriously.

It wasn’t just the police, either. Over the past three days, Seiya had wavered over and over about whether or not to tell his teachers or his aunt what had happened. Each time he did, though, he arrived at the same conclusion, and ended up saying nothing.

“.....?” The officer was starting to peer at him intently. Overcome with a feeling of awkwardness, Seiya distanced himself from the police box, walking instead towards the small convenience store that stood next door.

He casually checked his attire in the reflection in the glass. *Oh, yes. Look at you, handsome!*

He was wearing a simple dark jacket and pants, with an equally plain white v-neck; the outfit emphasized that he was slender, with a defined musculature. His hair had been precisely waxed to give it just a slight illusion of motion. He had long, slender eyebrows and eyes, and his face was held at a perfect 45 degree angle that boasted of intelligence and refinement.

Ahh, even I’d fall in love with that man in the mirror! With my spectacular

looks, plus the best grades in the whole school, it's no surprise at all that some transfer student I've never even talked to would want to ask me out...

...The issue was with the "If you refuse, I'll kill you" threat. That girl... yes, that's what she was—one of those "yandere" types I've heard so much about! Her overwhelming love for me has caused her to snap emotionally. A woman in such a wretched mental state deserves pity more than anything...

(No, no, no...)

Like hell I'm going to pity her when she's swinging that dangerous gun around. If it were a fruit knife, a carving knife, an icepick—the kind of weapon you see in sleazy suspense-thrillers—maybe then I could understand...

But then, come to think of it... where had she pulled the weapon from? She'd been empty-handed when she'd first addressed me, Seiya realized. It was only when I'd asked her, "What is it?" that the gun had appeared in her hand as if from nowhere. Maybe that's the first thing I should be wondering about...

"There you are," said Isuzu.

"Hngah?!" The sudden voice from behind snapped Seiya out of his train of thought.

Panicked, he turned around, steeled for whatever was coming, but Sento Isuzu had arrived at their meeting spot unarmed. And the outfit she was wearing was absolutely unremarkable—in fact, he might even call it appealing. She'd painted an attractive figure in her school uniform to begin with, and this was even better.

Wonderful! And most wonderful of all, she isn't carrying the musket!

"Let's get going," Isuzu said, apparently skipping the pleasantries.

"Where?"

"AmaBri."

"Er?" Seiya was confused.

"AmaBri," Isuzu explained, "Amagi Brilliant Park."

Amagi Brilliant Park. It was an old theme park, about ten minutes from the

station by bus.

“The bus leaves from the second terminal. Follow me.” Isuzu began swiftly walking away, but he stopped her.

“Wait, Sento—”

“Stop stalling,” she demanded.

“—just hang on a minute. Why are we going to *that* amusement park?”

“It’s not an amusement park. It’s a theme park.”

“Like I care. Would you just tell me what’s going on already? Why do two people who barely know each other have to go to some dodgy amusement park together?” Seiya asked, frustration rising.

“Dodgy...?” In the blink of an eye, Isuzu had produced the musket in question from beneath her short pleated skirt, whipped it around in a precise 260 degree arc, and pointed it at Seiya’s crotch.

A nearby woman, out with her child, stopped and stiffened.

The child said, “Mama, that lady’s got blue striped panties. That’s standard equipment...” To which the woman replied, “Hush! Be a model member of society and pretend you don’t see!”

Seiya wasn’t at the right angle to identify whether the child’s statement was accurate or not, but seeing him dismiss blue striped panties as “standard equipment” made Seiya fear what he might grow up to be. *But... no, no, never mind that now...*

Instead, Seiya spoke up: “Why are you angry?”

“.....”

“...There’s a whole lot of things I want you to explain,” he said, “including where you keep pulling that bizarre weapon from.”

“Let’s go.”

He was ignored.

Isuzu stowed her musket away, making use of whatever inexplicable law of physics she’d used to bring it out in the first place, then began walking towards

the second terminal.

Located in Amagi, a commuter town in the western part of Tokyo, the theme park in question might require a bit of explanation: Amagi Brilliant Park. What idiot was it who had thought up that painfully lame appellation—“brilliant?” Amagi Brilliant Park (aka AmaBri) was built during the 1980s, an amusement park (they insisted on the term “theme park”) riding the wave of the greatest excesses of the bubble economy.

The 1980s. It was an era in which delinquents had haircuts like the bows of space battleships; idols with mushroom-cap haircuts were all the rage; and anime was heavy with streaky black shading and characters striking extreme-perspective poses.

AmaBri’s reputation was quite negative compared to that of the world’s best theme parks. People called it a lot of things. Some called it, “The dubious legacy of the bubble economy.” Some called it, “A surefire relationship wrecker for couples who go there on a date.” Some called it, “A relic sure to baffle future archaeologists who happen to dig up Amagi City.” And among the young people of western Tokyo, AmaBri was known as “The archetypal awful dating spot.”

Seiya had a feeling he’d gone there once with someone when he was little, but now that he was in high school, he barely remembered it at all.

They’d been on the city bus for about five minutes. They had passed through an unremarkable residential area and come out into a hilly region covered in the greens of early spring, and now a castle could be seen beyond the trees. It was an attractive castle, all done in pastel blue.

Wow. More impressive than I’d anticipated... Seiya thought to himself. He’d been expecting the old amusement park to be rather run down, but even the coloring had a nice, modern sensibility to it. Much to his surprise, the place really looked legitimate.

The castle in the distance gradually grew closer and closer.

“The next stop is Amagi Brilliant Park. Disembarking passengers, please—” Seiya was just about to press the buzzer when Sento Isuzu, sitting beside him,

grabbed his sleeve tight.

“What is it?”

“One more stop,” Isuzu answered.

“Huh? But we’re going to Amagi Brilliant Park, aren’t we?” Seiya asked. “Isn’t that castle the front gate?”

“.....tel.” Isuzu murmured something, but he couldn’t hear it under the noise of the bus’s engine.

“I can’t hear you.”

“...hotel.”

“I said I can’t hear you.”

With a sense of deep resignation, Isuzu finally leaned in close to Seiya and spoke into his ear in a whisper that was barely more than a breath. “It’s a love hotel. It has no connection to the theme park.”

“I... I see,” he stammered.

“It’s a common mistake. AmaBri is the next stop down,” Isuzu explained. “The front entrance used to be here, but it was moved during renovations about ten years back. The bus station remained, though, and they built this, ah... ‘castle’ nearby.”



As they got closer, a large sign next to the castle came into view; it read “Hotel Alamo.” Beside it was an electric sign clearly proclaiming “Rooms Available.”

...Alamo? That's absurd! Seiya thought. The Alamo isn't a castle, it's a fort. And it's not some baroque structure, either; it was a defensive structure, specialized for practicality during the showdown between the Republic of Texas and the Mexican Army. It was a place of blood and gunpowder smoke, not some pastel fairy-tale castle that could host the kind of ball where a domestic abuse victim stupidly loses a glass slipper!

Ugh, so misleading. And it was forcing him to go down a really awkward train of thought. *You'd better make this up to me, you stupid castle!*

But Seiya managed to bite back his various internal objections, and simply state, with utmost calm: “How annoying. Why don't they change the name of the stop?”

“The park has been petitioning Amagi City for a change for some time, but it keeps getting put off for one reason or another,” Isuzu answered. “A lot of guests accidentally get off here and end up having to walk to the next station down.”

“Guests?”

“The park's visitors. Most theme parks call their visitors ‘guests’ and the employees ‘cast.’ Remember that.”

“Oh, really? That's an odd thing to know...”

Isuzu didn't respond to his observation—she just ignored him once again.

The city bus passed in front of Hotel Alamo and arrived at the next stop, “West Futomaru.” He hypothesized that this must be the name of the local residential area.

“We're here,” Isuzu announced.

He followed her off the bus.

Their destination was roughly 80 meters from the bus stop, up a gentle incline, and as they neared the top, the amusement park's front entrance could

be seen. The sidewalk was cracked. The gate was faded. A rusty sign read “Welcome to the Land of Wonder, Amagi Brilliant Park!”

There was nothing particularly welcoming about it, though, Seiya thought. It felt more like the elderly owner of a run-down ramen shop saying, “Is that a customer? Well, if you want it, I’ll make it... but, are you sure?” To be frank, the love hotel from earlier had had a far more wondrous feel to it.

He took the all-day pass that Isuzu had prepared for him, passing through the front gate and into the park. Beyond the gate, he was greeted by a large fountain plaza.

“.....”

The basin in the plaza’s central fountain was all dried up. There was no water shooting up from it... in fact, there was no water at all, just a bunch of round sculptures covered in a dingy brown moss.

In the distance beyond the plaza loomed a large citadel—not a castle, a citadel. There was no sense of fairy tale wonder about it at all. It felt more like the kind of thing built in the Kingdom of Jerusalem during the Crusades; a place that smelled of death, staffed with soldiers ready to give their lives to repel heretic armies.

Visitors were sparse too, he noticed; strange, given that it was Sunday. Seiya didn’t exactly frequent amusement parks himself, but even so, he’d never seen such a deserted-looking front plaza. It didn’t even look like they were cleaning it properly.

“There sure is a lot of trash on the ground...” Seiya was whispering to no one in particular when suddenly, Isuzu turned around and spoke.

“Where shall we go?”

The turn caused her pleated miniskirt to rustle. It would be an appealing enough sight if they really were here on a date, but— “You’re the one who brought me here,” he grumbled. “You choose.”

In response, Isuzu put a hand to her chin and considered. “...Let’s go to Sorcerer’s Hill, then.”

“Sorcerer’s Hill?”

“It’s one of AmaBri’s five themed areas. It’s a fairy-tale kingdom of wonders, home to the mascots from the magical realm, Maple Land.”

“Your monotonous tone doesn’t exactly portend wonder ahead,” Seiya observed.

“Follow me,” she instructed, and began walking towards Brilliant Park’s northern area—labeled “Sorcerer’s Hill” in the pamphlet.

“Sheesh...”

She was cold as ice. How, exactly, was this a date? “Full of himself” was Seiya’s default setting, but at this point, even he was starting to catch on to the fact that Sento Isuzu had no romantic interest in him at all.

Why, then? He worked the thought over in his mind, but nothing came. Still, it seemed he had no choice but to wander around with her for a while.

Around this dodgy amusement park...

Just as Isuzu had described, Sorcerer’s Hill had a sort of fairy tale theme: Everything in it was fairly by-the-book, from the pastel color scheme to the various attractions, coasters, and merry-go-rounds.

Isuzu’s first stop was the “thrill coaster” attraction. Seiya cringed slightly at the sight, and she shot him a dubious glance.

“You aren’t scared, are you?” she asked.

“...Of course not,” Seiya scoffed. “I was just thinking, it doesn’t look like something a grown man should be riding, that’s all.”

“I see. Let’s ride anyway.”

With grim expressions, Seiya and Isuzu took their seats in the otherwise empty coaster, side by side. An odd fanfare played, and the car took off. The speed kept a comfortable pace from beginning to end. There wasn’t much in the way of steep hills, and even the sharpest curve didn’t offer more than just a slight tilt. For a supposed “thrill coaster,” there wasn’t much thrill to be found.

As they got out of the coaster, Isuzu spoke up: “Did you have fun?”

“No.”

“I see,” she observed. “Let’s move on, then.” She promptly started walking towards a new destination.

With nothing else to say, Seiya followed silently.

Their next stop was an attraction called “Tiramii’s Flower Adventure.” It was a building about the size of a school gymnasium, with fairy tale flora painted on the walls. At the entrance was a statue of a mascot that looked a bit like a Pomeranian: It had round, button eyes and a rotund body that stood about three heads tall. It was a fairly cute design, all things considered. This mascot, he inferred, must be “Tiramii.”

The attraction itself consisted of boarding a four-person car on a track, which would escort you around the fairy tale garden that Tiramii had grown. This one, too, was— “Awful.”

The worst part of it was that the car seemed poorly attached to its track, which caused it to jostle frequently. In a way, it was more “thrilling” than the thrill coaster had been. It also made him motion sick.

Here and there they were greeted by “talking flower” animatronics, but their drive assemblies must have broken down, because their movements were jerky and jittery. On top of that, no thought had been put into the audio mixing, so it was hard to tell what exactly the flowers were saying: they were probably supposed to be saying “Welcome to Tiramii’s Flower Adventure!” but what actually reached the ear was the far more unsettling “Eccum... eerami... ewere... enture!” More than anything, it brought the image of the maddening shriek of the deadly mandrake to Seiya’s mind.

“How did you like it?” Isuzu asked again.

“It took years off my life.”

“I see. Let’s move on, then.” This time, there was something halfhearted in Isuzu’s own reply.

“Wait,” Seiya said. “Are you going to be like this the whole time?”

“Like what?”

“I mean...”

Looking drained, she picked up on the hint. “I think the music theater should be fun. Look, over there.”

But “Macaron’s Music Theater,” whose sign offered a sheep-like mascot playing a violin, was declared “Closed Today.”

“But it’s Sunday,” he objected incredulously. “They’re taking the day off?”

“...He takes off whenever he’s not in the mood,” Isuzu sighed. “The Fairy of Music, Macaron, plays quite brilliantly—but unfortunately, he has an artistic temperament.”

“Ahh...”

“Let’s move on.”

The next site they visited was the building diagonally-opposite the music theater, “Moffle’s House of Sweets.” Like the “Flower Adventure” from before, this was an indoor attraction. It was a bit like the gingerbread house from the Grimm fairy tale, decorated with pancakes, whipped cream, strawberries, oranges, and other sweet treats.

“Welcome...”

When they came inside, a glassy-eyed employee (or “cast member,” as Isuzu insisted) handed them water pistols. No, they weren’t water pistols... These were laser pointers designed to look like water pistols. You pulled the trigger, and it shot a laser.

In the entrance hall hung a large screen, which played a video explaining how the attraction worked: “Welcome to the shop of Moffle, Fairy of Sweets! Unfortunately, the bakery has been overrun by naughty rats! Use your magic water pistols and teach those rats a lesson!”

The video was followed by detailed safety instructions: Don’t look into the barrel of the pistol (because of the lasers).

Don’t be rough with the pistol (because of its delicate construction).

Please return the pistols to the box by the exit (because of the cost).

“If you shoot a lot of rats, Moffle will take a great souvenir photo with you! Do your best, everyone!”

Ahh, he thought. He’d grasped the gist of it: They’d be firing the laser pointers at something like those animatronics from before, competing for points. Unlike the previous attractions, this seemed like it might have some game-like appeal.

“Okay! Start the battle!”

The double doors in the back of the room opened automatically. It was, apparently, an attraction where the visitors had to proceed on foot. It seemed like a recipe for trouble if there was a big crowd there, he thought, but there was no need for concern in that regard—after all, even on a Sunday, the place was totally deserted.

“Go on,” Isuzu urged him, and Seiya proceeded in.

He found himself in a passage designed to look like a kitchen: there was a fancy wash station, an oven, grill, *etc.* Animatronic rats popped out randomly here and there.

He fired.

He turned the water gun-shaped laser pointer towards a rat and shot.

He hit. He missed. He missed. He missed. He hit. “Faster than I expected...” Even more rats appeared, one after another.

He missed. He missed. He missed. He missed. He finally hit...

“They’re too fast,” Seiya criticized.

“We’re coming to the storage room,” Isuzu said in reply. “Be on your guard.”

“Huh?” They moved from the kitchen into the storage room, where the naughty rats started coming even faster.

He missed. He missed. He missed. He missed. He missed.

“Hold on a minute! This is a little too hard, don’t you think?!”

“You’re wasting a lot of ammo.”

“What the hell did you expect—”

“You waste a lot of breath, too.”

It wasn't all animatronics; some of the rats were holograms as well. They'd appear, faint left or right, then disappear without even giving you time to take aim. It would be impossible for an ordinary human's eyes to follow them.

They ended up coming to the final room without racking up many points at all.

Then came another announcement: “Too bad! You didn't kill very many! Great try, though!”

“W-Were we killing them?” Seiya interjected. “I thought we were ‘teaching them a lesson’!”

Why the hell was the premise so violent? Wouldn't hearing the word “kill” in a family-friendly atmosphere be kind of a shock to most people?

Despite Seiya's objections, the announcement continued. “Moffle is very grateful to you! Go get your souvenir photo taken with him in the next room!” The door in the back opened for them.

Since just standing around wouldn't get them anywhere, he and Isuzu walked towards it in grim silence. They dropped their guns into the return box, then proceeded down the hallway that would take them to the last room.

“You'll be able to have your souvenir photo taken with Moffle now,” Isuzu told him.

“You mean that ‘Fairy of Sweets’ thing?”

“Yes,” she replied. “He's AmaBri's headliner mascot.”

“...I'm not really interested in getting a picture with some guy in a costume,” Seiya admitted.

“Just meet him, would you? It'll be fun,” she said, in a tone utterly bereft of such.

With an air of resignation, Seiya followed after Isuzu.

The corridor led them into a small photo studio. The right half of the room was set up like a bakery, stuffed with prop donuts and cakes, and there was an old-fashioned mechanical register on the counter.

I guess it's the backdrop for the photo with this Moffle person, he thought, but the mascot in question wasn't anywhere to be seen. There wasn't even a clerk present. The studio was completely uninhabited.

"What's going on here?" Seiya wondered.

"We get guests here so rarely..." Isuzu apologized. "He's probably resting in the back."

"....."

"Press the service bell next to the register. Then he'll come."

Seiya did as he was told. The bell let out a pleasant 'ding.' He waited for a while.

At last, from behind the counter, the mascot— Did not arrive. He tapped the bell again, this time with a little more force. Still, nobody came.

"...I'm thinking he's not in," Seiya concluded. "Let's just go."

"No. Let's wait a little longer."

"Why should I? I'm under no obligation to wait here in this half-assed attraction for some minor mascot to grace me with his presence. I mean—" He was interrupted by a *clack*.

The iron employees-only door—hidden behind the counter—opened, and the mascot in question plodded into view.

"Moffu." He was about 2.5 heads tall, his silhouette soft and huggable.

Is he supposed to be a mouse? Seiya wondered. His appearance was undeniably rodentine, but his plump, rotund body was a bit more akin to that of a wombat or a guinea pig. Definitely a strange creature, either way.

He had big button eyes and plush, stubby arms, and he was wearing a white chef's costume and hat. All fairly by-the-book signifiers of cuteness, but he had to give them credit for getting that much right.

“...That’s the park’s headliner mascot, Moffle, the Fairy of Sweets,” said Isuzu, by way of introduction. “Height: 144 centimeters. Weight: Top secret. Top running speed: 35 km per hour. Special skills: Making cakes and playing soccer. Favorite food: Anything sweet, especially donuts. In addition to his current patisserie gear, he also has tuxedo gear for formal outings.”

“What’s with the ‘new mobile suit’-style explanation?” Seiya asked.

Moffle stepped up to Seiya and Isuzu, his feet squeaking as he went.

“Moffu.”

“I want a souvenir photo with him,” Isuzu told the rodent. “Okay?”

“.....” Moffle gave a firm nod in response to Isuzu’s question. He whipped a smartphone out from under his apron, manipulated it adroitly with his squishy paw, then held the phone up to Seiya and Isuzu and snapped the picture. He then showed them the image on the smartphone, as if to say, “There, I took it.”

“Wait, wait... Why did you take a picture of us?!” Seiya demanded.

“Moffu...” Moffle’s brows knitted—a pretty impressive bit of suit design.

“Don’t glare at me! We’re your customers, you know!”

“Calm down, Kanie-kun,” Isuzu urged him.

“Shut up! I am calm!”

But Seiya was sensing something from this mascot creature that was hard to put into words: something like destiny. Not the good kind of destiny, of course. It felt more like a sense of deep foreboding—like meeting your mortal enemy, or a bad penny that would keep turning up.

“W... Well anyway,” Seiya spluttered, “I’ve had enough of this. Why would I want a souvenir photo with this minor-league, worthless, wise-ass mascot anyway? Let’s just move on already.”

But as Seiya started heading toward the exit— “Moffu!” Suddenly, Moffle kicked him in the butt.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Seiya shouted as he picked himself up and whipped back around.

But Moffle's response was far from contrite—he actually tilted his head toward the floor and made a motion like spitting.

Definitely a wise-ass attitude.

"The things you said about him made him angry," Isuzu told him.

"Whatever I said about him, what the hell kind of mascot kicks a customer?! Look, now he's baiting me like he's a boxer!"

Moffle was performing a little light footwork, hissing through his teeth while jabbing rhythmically into the air.

"Why, you little...!"

So some jerk in a costume wants to fight me, does he? Fine! I don't want to get stuck with the bill for damaging the suit, but I can't just let this stand. I can't leave here until I lay this guy out, just once. Seiya was about to step forward to do just that when— "Moffu!" Moffle came running. He closed the gap between them in an instant. His paw tore through the air and hit Seiya right in the solar plexus. *Ker-MOFF!*

"Hnngh!" Seiya's breath caught in his throat.

It was hard. It was heavy. It was one hell of a fist—rather, a paw. No simple mascot in a costume could dish a blow like this. Then again, no matter how rotten the theme park might be, maybe it meant something to be a headliner mascot...

Seiya fell to his knees, doubled over.

Looking down his nose at him, Moffle beckoned him with his paw.

"Damn you..."

But Seiya wasn't finished yet. His dignity couldn't bear the thought of not getting a single clean hit in against the bizarre cuddly mouse-thing. His weak point... what's the mouse's weak point?

"That's enough." Isuzu's musket slipped in between them. She must have pulled it out again at some point. "Any more of this could get one of you killed. I won't let a place of hopes and dreams like the House of Sweets be stained with blood. I need you both to stop it, right now."

“When exactly did this place contain hopes and dreams, again?” Seiya scorned.

“Moffu...”

“If you insist on continuing,” warned Isuzu, “you’ll both have to deal with me.” Another musket appeared from underneath her skirt. With one in each hand, now, she thrust them mercilessly at Seiya and Moffle both.



“Ugh...”

So she has more than one, does she? She seems serious about this, too... Out of fear for his safety, he decided to relent.

Seiya reluctantly stepped down. Moffle lowered his fists (well, paws) at the same time. For some reason, he didn't seem at all surprised to see Isuzu's weapons.

She turned to Seiya. “Well, Kanie-kun? Did you enjoy communicating with Moffle through your fists?”

“Uh, it felt more like he beat the crap out of me...” he confessed.

“Do you think you can be friends now?”

“Hold on,” he objected. “Why would I *want* to be friends with this homicidal rodent?”

“Moffu.” Moffle's vocalization suggested an equal dissatisfaction with the idea. Seiya was surprised anew by how much emotion he could convey through a costume-mounted speaker.

“...Well, never mind that now,” Isuzu said, placating both parties. “I took your souvenir photo, so let's go somewhere else.”

“Souvenir photo?” said Seiya, somewhat incredulously.

Isuzu held out her own smartphone. She had captured the moment when Moffle had slammed his paw into him. There was an afterimage blur, and it was taken from a low angle, which added to the sense of gruesome impact.

“I'm not sure this counts as a souvenir photo...” he grumbled.

“Let's go.” Isuzu began walking towards the exit. Left with little other choice, Seiya followed after her.

Moffle spat once more, then squeaked his way back behind the counter.

What the hell?! He's the worst mascot ever! He's just some gangster-ass mouse dressed up like a cook! Seiya scoffed to himself, then spoke aloud. “What kind of lowlife punk did they stick inside that thing?”

“There's no one inside,” Isuzu said absently.

“What?”

“Moffle is Moffle. There’s no one inside.”

“Huh? Oh...”

That’s right. He’d heard of this before. To preserve the sense of wonder for children, theme parks generally wouldn’t acknowledge the existence of suit actors inside their mascot costumes. The really serious first-rate theme parks even made their suit actors adhere to strict rules of confidentiality. After all, it would be a huge problem if one of them was overheard on a train saying something like “I was in the **ck*y suit, today. Let me tell you about this one little brat I ran into...” That was probably what Isuzu meant by “there’s no one inside.”

“...Sure. That’s what we’ll tell everyone.” His response was a sarcastic one, but she shook her head in response.

“That’s not what I mean,” she insisted. “I mean there’s really no one inside.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s totally what we’ll tell everyone.”

Leaving the deeply unpleasant “Moffle’s House of Sweets” behind, Seiya and Isuzu went around to several other attractions. Many of them were closed, even though it was a Sunday, and the ones that were open weren’t particularly entertaining. All-in-all, it was a miserable experience. Even the snack shop they stopped by when he started getting peckish—“Maple Kitchen,” it was called—only offered curry, yakisoba, and croquettes. When he asked for yakisoba, he was told “We can make it, but it’ll take an hour.”

“Why an hour?” he demanded to know.

“We’ll have to go buy the ingredients. That means a trip to the local supermarket,” responded a clerk who was clearly just there part-time.

Overwhelmingly awful!

His tolerance had reached its limits. Slapping the tabletop, Seiya leaned in close to Isuzu. “What the hell is this about, Sento? How long are you going to keep me on this awful date?!”

“Are you angry?” she wanted to know.

“You bet I am! These dodgy attractions, this dodgy snack corner... It’s got a dedication to appearance that makes the local love hotel look good, and the employees treat the customers like crap! How could anyone have fun in a place like this?!”

He was done. Let her threaten him with the musket if she wanted.

“This place holds the very concept of entertainment in contempt!” he continued. “It seems to think ‘Hey, they’re just kids, who cares?’ But kids aren’t stupid! You need to be utterly meticulous with them! You need to put effort into the tiniest details! You can’t do it if you don’t give a damn! You need passion and conviction, and I don’t see even a fragment of it here! If you want to make people dream, first, you need to *believe* in that dream! And if you can’t even convince kids, then what’s the point? I’m saying...”

“.....”

“I’m saying... ahh...” he trailed off.

Isuzu’s eyes had gone wide. It was as if she couldn’t believe the words coming out of Seiya’s mouth.

(Now I’ve gone and done it...) Seiya thought, immediately filled with regret. He’d been so careful never to say anything like that in front of anyone.

“‘If you want to make people dream, first, you need to believe in that dream’... That does hurt to hear,” she admitted.

Seiya said nothing.

“I don’t think an ordinary high school student would be able to come up with something like that.”

“Don’t give me the credit. I just read it in a book somewhere.” He looked out the window, feigning ignorance.

But Isuzu wouldn’t let him off the hook. “I thought you were angry because you were threatened by a girl you barely knew into wandering aimlessly around a theme park,” she mused. “But you were angry for a completely different reason. It’s as if you’re mad at the theme park itself. That’s interesting.”

“What’s this? It’s almost like you realize what a pain in the neck you’ve been.”

His voice was dripping with sarcasm, but she didn't show any sign of being hurt by it.

"I didn't say that to make you angry," Isuzu said. "I was just impressed by your insight about the 'monster' that is entertainment."

"Look, what are you getting at?" he wanted to know. "What exactly are you after with me?"

"... 'Kodama Seiya.'" The moment the words left Isuzu's lips, Seiya's face tensed. "He was a brilliant child performer from a few years back, I'm told. He was an amazing talent with incredible charm; he played the piano at a professional level; and he had an excellent singing voice. He could be a bit bratty, but he was always earnest when it mattered, and he could even play perfectly off of veteran entertainers. He was society's idea of the perfect child, and in high demand for commercials and dramas."

Seiya remained silent in the face of her accusation.

"But about five years ago, Kodama Seiya suddenly retired from show business. The talent agencies and companies he canceled on saw terrible losses as a result, I believe. The reason he gave was 'I want to focus on school and family,' but nobody knows if that's true. Kodama Seiya fell off the map after that..." Isuzu turned her gaze out the window, looking out over Amagi Brilliant Park. "He would be in high school by now... I wonder what he'd say if he saw an amusement park like this."

"I see now..." A completely new kind of anger began to rise up in Seiya's chest. "...You knew everything. That's why you brought me out here."

"Who would ever ask an egomaniac like you on a date otherwise?" Isuzu replied without even a hint of a smile.

"I don't know what you're after, but Kodama Seiya died a long time ago. Wiped from the face of the earth. If you're thinking you can get some stupid child actor to do something for you, you've got another thing coming." Seiya stood up. "I'm out of here. Threaten me with your freak weapon if you want to."

"...Very well," she concluded. "But first, eat these croquettes." Rather than

drawing her weapon, she offered the croquettes on the table to Seiya. He'd been forced to buy them when they didn't have any yakisoba.

"Hmm?"

"They're best when they're still hot."

"Who cares about the stupid croquettes?"

"Just try them." For some reason, her voice was utterly resolute.

Seiya relented, took a croquette, and brought it to his mouth. It was just some item off a cheap snack shop menu. It couldn't possibly be any good.

That was what he was thinking as he took his first bite, but— "...Muh."

What on earth? It was great. Absolutely delicious.

The breading wasn't too thick, just nicely crunchy, and inside it was juicy and fluffy. The plentiful minced meat blended with the potatoes, which had been painstakingly mashed, to create a perfect flavor balance. To be quite honest, he had never had a croquette like it before.

"Delicious, isn't it?"

"Mm... Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "It is."

"They make these here," she told him. "You can't get them anywhere else."

"Did you make them?" he asked. Given the way she'd been talking all this time, it seemed like she was connected to AmaBri somehow. Which meant— "No," she responded, "someone else did. Would you like to meet them before you go?"

"Meet them? I don't understand."

"Don't worry," Isuzu advised, "Just eat."

"....." Spurred on by the exquisite flavor, Seiya silently polished off the remaining croquettes. They really were delicious. It was an amusement park lacking in hopes and dreams, but these croquettes, at least, were something else.

He wouldn't say, exactly, that the croquettes had charmed him into it, but

Seiya decided to hang out with Isuzu a bit longer.

After passing through a door labeled “Authorized Personnel Only,” he was led around Amagi Brilliant Park’s backstage area by Isuzu. It appeared she had a key for the “employees only” doors.

“I knew you had some connection to this place,” Seiya accused.

“I didn’t mention it?” Isuzu replied carelessly.

“You didn’t,” he grumbled. “Though it was easy enough to guess from the way you talked about it...”

“Wear this pass around your neck,” she said, and handed him a card on a lanyard. It was a guest pass with the words “LEVEL 4” printed in large letters.

“What’s this ‘LEVEL 4’ part mean?” he asked.

“That’s your security clearance,” she told him. “The newest part-time workers are limited to level one sections. The highest level is five. Dangerous areas—like the generator facilities and those housing important company secrets—require level five clearance.”

“That’s some tight security you’ve got going there...” he said, stifling the urge to add “...for such a crummy amusement park.”

“This is fairly standard, actually,” Isuzu explained. “The level four pass I gave you will get you into most places.”

“You’re entrusting some pretty major security clearance to an outsider like me...” Seiya sounded suspicious.

“That’s because you’ll need it to get where we’re going—to see the manager of the park.”

“Manager?”

Isuzu continued to lead him through the backstage area.

He’d never been backstage at an amusement park before, but he shouldn’t have been too surprised to see it was a typical boring employee passageway: flavorless, colorless, and charmless. Here and there lay stacks of cleaning tools and cardboard boxes, alongside ever-present signs enumerating disaster

guidelines and cast shift schedules. If he showed someone a picture of just this area and told them he'd been inside a military base, they might actually believe him.

They took a stairway down to an underground passage. Then, after a little more walking, they reached an elevator. It was at this point that Isuzu spoke again: "We're currently at the center of the park, directly below Maple Castle. We can take this elevator to the castle's top floor."

"Maple Castle?" Seiya questioned. He suddenly remembered that excessively imposing castle he'd seen from the park entrance. That hadn't been a fairy tale castle by any means; it was a fortress designed for practicality, with loopholes and a moat. It radiated austere fortitude. It felt like the kind of place where attacking armies would be met with rains of bacteria-infected feces and cauldrons of boiling hot oil.

They took the elevator up to the top floor, passed through a short hallway straight ahead, and arrived at a rooftop garden.

A rooftop garden. That was the only way to describe the place he'd found himself.

Above him lay a sky glowing with the first tinges of sunset. Before him lay flowers starting to bud with the warmth of spring. And at the center of it all lay a small, still pond. There was a breathtaking mix of light and shadow in the garden, accompanied by an overwhelming sense of tranquility and refinement. It was, by far, the most wondrous thing he'd seen in all the time he'd spent in this amusement park.

At the edge of the garden stood a girl. Her silver hair had a whitish cast, which seemed to sparkle beneath the blazing red sky, and the breezy material of her long, white dress gently embraced a delicate frame. She ran her fingers over a flower whose name he did not know, then murmured something to a small bird who had alighted nearby.

Seiya was struck by a strange sense of déjà vu; it was almost as if he had been here before. As he watched, too spellbound to act, Isuzu spoke up from beside him. "Go on. I'll wait here."

“Huh? But...”

“Go.”

Reluctantly, he stepped out into the garden. The unfamiliar girl turned to face him, and the bird, perched on her finger, flew away.

What was she, fourteen? Fifteen? The closer Seiya got, the better he could make out her face. There was something mysterious about her features—something that inspired strong affection in him. He was so enchanted that all other thoughts flew from his mind. Had he ever been so taken with anyone in his life?

It was only when he came within a few steps of her that he realized it: She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were focused on a point somewhere over his head—some vacant space in the evening sky above. *Could it be... is she blind?*

While Seiya wrestled with himself over what to say, she spoke. “Would you be Kanie Seiya-sama, by chance?”

“Huh?” he spluttered, caught off guard by her question. “Oh... Yes, I am...”

He was right. She was blind.

“I am very glad to have you here, Kanie-sama. I am Latifah... Latifah Fleuranza. I am the manager of this theme park. I must offer you my warmest thanks for coming here to see me.”

A foreign name? I wasn't expecting that... Then again, she did look foreign. And... *she* was the manager? This young girl?

“S-Sure... I don't get most of this, but... er, it's nice to meet you,” he answered, still disoriented.

The girl who called herself Latifah smiled and let out a soft noise of excitement. It was as if she was saying “I've been waiting so long to meet you.”

“I pray that Isuzu-san has done nothing to offend you,” Latifah apologized on behalf of her employee. “If she has upset you in any way, I hope that you will forgive her—she has very little experience in interacting with gentlemen.”

“Oh. Well... I've been afraid for my life a few times,” Seiya admitted, “but I'm still in one piece, I guess.”

“I see.” There was a diplomatic pause, and then Latifah continued, “...I must confess, it is I who asked her to bring you here. For there is something that I *must* ask of you.”

“Ask of me?” Seiya said doubtfully.

“Yes,” she affirmed. “Follow me this way, and I shall explain.” Her dress rippling behind her, Latifah began walking down the flagstone pathway, and further into the garden. Despite her apparent blindness, she must have known the garden like the back of her hand—there was no uncertainty in her gait whatsoever.

A little ways down the path, they found a terrace. There was a table with a mosaic-patterned marble top waiting there, flanked by elegantly wrought iron chairs. Atop the table sat a china tea set.

“Do sit.” Latifah invited him.

“S-Sure...”

Latifah made them tea. Her every movement was the epitome of grace. She poured hot water into the cups, first, and carefully steamed the tea leaves while waiting for them to warm. “You smell of fried foods,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Have you been eating croquettes at Maple Kitchen, by chance? I hope very much that you enjoyed them,” she said, a playful note in her tone.

“Did you make those?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Yes, I did,” Latifah admitted modestly. “I make them every day, hoping only that the guests might enjoy them.”

I see. So she's the one who made them...

“Those croquettes were...” he trailed off, briefly recalling their taste and texture, “...delicious.”

“Thank you,” said Latifah, graciously accepting the compliment. “As you may have noticed, I am blind, but I can tell when they are cooked by listening to the sounds of the frying oil.”

Seiya was concerned. “You cook them yourself? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “Those croquettes are my pride and joy. Though I fear that my tea may be somewhat less pleasing... Please, help yourself.”

She placed a teacup in front of Seiya. It was billowing with fragrant steam with a calming aroma. He blew on it lightly, then took a sip.

Delicious. He was far from an expert on black tea, but in his opinion, it was incredible.

“Is it to your taste?” she wanted to know.

“It’s incredible,” Seiya replied.

“I am very glad to hear that.” Latifah smiled quietly. It was a smile like the sun behind the mountains at twilight.

Enraptured, Seiya gazed at that smile for a few moments, before clearing his throat. “...I don’t really understand any of this. What did you want to ask me to do? And who are you?” he asked. “I’m already reeling at the fact that there’s a place like this at the center of an amusement park that’s so... you know.”

“Of course,” she said soothingly. “Have you seen our Amagi Brilliant Park?”

“In *exhaustive* detail.” Yeah, definitely. “Exhaustive” was the right word...

“How did you find it?”

It’s the worst amusement park I’ve ever been to... It would be easy enough for him to say that, but for some reason, the words caught on his tongue.

Nevertheless, a look of melancholy fell over her face, suggesting that she could read his thoughts from his manner. “You are dissatisfied. You found it displeasing, then?”

“Well... I...” he trailed off, unsure of what to say next.

“This is what I wished to ask you, Kanie-sama: Will you take this amusement park, which hangs on the verge of ruin, and revive it?” It was an earnest proposal.

“Wha...?” Seiya couldn’t believe his ears. *What the hell? Revive this crummy amusement park? Me?*

“I want you to become the manager of Amagi Brilliant Park,” Latifah explained. “I officially ask this of you, Kanie Seiya, as a member of the royal family of the magical realm, Maple Land.”

What the hell are you babbling about? That’s what he’d say under most circumstances—challenging her sanity—but this girl, Latifah, seemed far too rational and refined for that to be a likely explanation.

While Seiya was still struggling to figure out what to say, she spoke again. “Do you think me mad?”

“Well, I...”

“But I swear to you,” she told him solemnly, “this is a matter of utmost seriousness. I am asking you to save our amusement park, because I believe that you can do it.”

“Okay,” he managed to respond, “but... this is all pretty out of nowhere. I can’t say ‘oh, sure’ just like that... you know?”

“Yes... of course, you are correct.” The girl smiled peacefully, her face lowered. “It must sound like nonsense to you, an inhabitant of the mortal realm. But this amusement park is an important dream *ager* constructed here in your world by the magical realm, Maple Land.”

So *this* amusement park... was built by a... “magical realm?” And what was a dream *ager*?

“A... magical realm, huh?”

“There are many other realms like it,” Latifah told him, and went on to explain further. “The Dream Kingdom, Regnum Somni; the Animal Republic, Polytear; the Schubert Empire with its swords and sorcery; the future land Avenir... There are many such realms, and Maple Land is one of them. It exists in the threshold between the sea and the land. Many of these realms build *ager* here in the mortal world—*ager* is a word that means ‘field’ in your language—Digimall is one of the most famous; Cosmic Studios and Highlander Fujimi are *ager* as well.”

“Uhh...”

“An *ager* is a happiness farm. It allows us to gather together feelings of joy and excitement from those who visit the park and crystallize them into *animus*, which is an important source of energy for us.”

“.....”

Latifah seemed to pick up on Seiya’s dumbfounded reaction. “It must all sound very unbelievable... It is not common knowledge among inhabitants of the mortal world. That is why... first, I shall give you the gift of magic.”

“Magic?” Seiya parroted in confusion.

“I do not know what kind of magic it will be,” Latifah mused. “That is up to the whim of the goddess Libra. But perhaps the magic will enable you to understand...”

“Huh?”

The girl leaned over the table with a slight flush in her cheeks. A sense of bashfulness and hesitance appeared in the vast pools of her eyes. “Kanie-sama. Please, stay right where you are.”

“Huh?”

“N-Now then... pardon me...”

“Huh?” He didn’t even have time to get away.

Her small, pretty lips touched his in a kiss. It was a soft sensation. A warm sensation. That’s all it was, so why was it hitting him so hard? Why did he feel this powerful electricity shooting down his neck?

A kiss from a girl who had seemed so utterly chaste— His mind went blank. It was hard to breathe. As the gentle sensation moved away—slowly, lingeringly, wistfully—Seiya felt something else rushing into his mind. Limitless emotion—a powerful, indescribable something that was burrowing deep, deep inside a part of his humanity.



I don't understand, Seiya thought. I just came out here on this shady date because a weird girl threatened me. How did it come to this? Why is this happening?

Something was coming. Magic—a mysterious magic that someone, somewhere, had prepared for him through means he would never know.

“Do not forget—” the girl told him from across a gulf of vast whiteness. “My feelings—the first and last time that you will ever know them...”

The first thing he felt was love, followed by an unendurable melancholy, and then timeworn nostalgia. A small boy, walking away in twilight. He looked back and said this: “I’m with you. I will save you—”

Wait, wait... this is a beautiful mood and all but... at least give me some kind of explana—

With a feeling as if he’d been struck by lightning, Kanie Seiya lost consciousness.



The strains of *Hotaru no Hikari* drifted through the air as the amusement park sank into twilight.

Moffle had entertained 28 guests at his attraction today. A mere three of them had taken the souvenir photo with him, one of those being that arrogant child, Kanie Seiya.

So damned few, and on a Sunday at that... In the old days, they’d have had more guests than they could count, all climbing over each other to get into Moffle’s House of Sweets. Crowds of children with smiling faces... the excitement, the shrieks, the laughter... That was all in the past now.

“Moffu...” He shut off the lights for the attraction, then did a little basic clean-up. They didn’t have the money to hire a maintenance crew to work overnight, so disinfecting the water pistol-shaped laser pointers with medicinal alcohol, checking to make sure they still worked, and changing the batteries were all

things he did himself. It was also his job to repair and touch up any animatronics that might have broken down over the course of time, as was checking the fire systems and locking up after.

Once all the work was done, Moffle, Fairy of Sweets, would stop in with the part-time cast member who worked with him. “Time to close up shop, fumo.”

“Thank you, sir,” the part-timer would respond brusquely, then head straight for the cast service door.

Not a single word of small talk. The boy was under the impression that Moffle was a company employee who did his work in a mascot suit because they were short-handed. *Ah, well. Let him think what he likes. What good would it do to tell him that the manager at his part-time job is an honest-to-goodness fairy from a magical realm called Maple Land?*

Moffle plodded his way down the underground passage, returned the Moffle’s House of Sweets key at the security center, signed it back in with the time of return, then punched his time card.

“Moffle-san. How did things go with the guests today?” The elderly security guard—this one knew what he really was—asked him in a kindly voice.

“Typical, fumo. Though one had a chip on his shoulder, and we got into a bit of a scuffle.”

“Ah, I see,” the security guard sympathized. “I know it’s hard, but try to hang in there.”

“Thanks, fumo.”

Normally, this would be when he’d leave the park behind and go fill himself up at a yakitori restaurant with his mascot friends. But today he had something else on his mind, so Moffle turned back.

The old security guard, who had been prepared to check his belongings as per their usual routine, called to Moffle as he walked away. “You’re not leaving yet?”

“Nah.”

Typically, when employees left work for the day, they had to undergo a token

search of their belongings. There were so many of them, after all, and they weren't under the illusion that there was no one in the park who might try to smuggle merchandise or equipment and sell it off somewhere. Inspections like that were standard in most department stores and amusement parks. Of course, the dedicated full-time employees hated it, but— "I'm gonna speak to the manager, fumo."

"Latifah-san, eh?" The security guard said with a smile. "Say hello to her for me, would you?"

"Right." Moffle recalled that the old security guard was a fan of hers. Not an uncommon trait among the full-timers—it was one of the few things that kept the fading morale there hanging on by a thread.

Moffle wouldn't say he was a fan, himself. He had an affection for Latifah, surely enough—but that was because she was his niece. And while she cared for him too, the feelings were entirely platonic.

After a trip through the underground corridors in an electric cart, Moffle arrived at Maple Castle's rooftop garden. Latifah came running immediately, her expression joyful. "Uncle!"

He'd told her time and again that it wasn't safe for her to run...

He embraced her tightly. *She's lost weight again*, Moffle thought. *She feels so light. But of course, that curse is still eating away at her...*

"Did you meet the Kanie boy?" he asked.

"I did," she told him. "The Bestowal of Magic caused him to lose consciousness, so I asked Isuzu-san to see him home."

"Is that so, fumo..."

So she's kissed him, then. Moffle felt a small prick in his chest, like his heart was being stuck with a needle. With a kiss, a woman of Maple Land's royal family could bestow magic on a man chosen by her divine revelation.

No one knew what kind of magic it would result in, as it was different for everybody. Generally speaking, though, it would be whatever kind of magic the man needed. A man chosen during a time of battle would learn battle magic. A

man chosen during an epidemic would learn healing magic. It was all up to the whim of the goddess Libra. That was what the elders of Maple Land said, at any rate. He couldn't vouch for it himself.

"...We went a few rounds together when he stopped by my House of Sweets," Moffle said. "Not much of a man, by my estimation. I doubt he'll be much use in saving the park, fumo."

"Really?" Latifah said doubtfully. "But have you not read the profile that Isuzu-san wrote about him?"

"I have, fumo."

This was the last paragraph of the report written by the aforementioned elite member of the Maple Land royal guard: **...Given this information, we can ascertain that the Kanie Seiya indicated by the revelation is possessed of a dual nature; one side is that of a rational commander and level-headed strategist. The other is that of a passionate artist and entertainer who understands the needs of the people. To make use of both at once will be challenging, and he seems possessed of an internal conflict about this aspect of himself, as well.**

In my own humble opinion, I believe that the herculean task of revitalizing Amagi Brilliant Park can only be achieved by a mortal with this dual nature.

First Royal Guard of Maple Land, Yisuzurch Saintlucia.

Moffle just chalked down the reasoning on behalf of the girl (her Japanese name was Sento Isuzu) to her youth: of course she'd want this Kanie Seiya to be their savior. Of course she'd want him to be someone who could turn around their failing amusement park. But the situation they were in wasn't nearly so forgiving.

"Isuzu may have a high opinion of him, but I've got my doubts, fumo. A man's character can't turn around a slumping economy." Whether it was a business or a country, when a community stagnated, there was always a reason for it. A systematic reason that couldn't be fought. Even if this boy happened to be a genius, there was nothing any one man could do about it.

“...Then you believe that there is nothing to be done, and that we should simply allow it to fall?” Latifah asked sadly.

Moffle was at a loss for words. “I didn’t... say that, fumo...”

“There must be a reason why the guests have abandoned us,” she protested. “Some reason that is beyond our comprehension. If the guests are mortals, then, why not leave the park’s management to a mortal? ...That is my proposal.”

“I hear you, fumo...” But, despite his answer, Moffle still thought... *It’s not going to be that easy.*

They had a mere two weeks left. To get the necessary number of people—approximately 100,000—to visit the park in that time was just not possible. They’d have to maintain a pace of over 7,000 visitors per day. Even on a Sunday, their most popular day of the week, their total attendance rarely broke 3,000.

The cast were doing everything that was in their power to do. But, despite all that, no one was coming. There was nothing to be done about that.

Then, if the park couldn’t reach its goal, *they* were going to get the run of the place. They’d close the park. They’d fire all the cast. They’d tear down all the structures and put up some chemical-smothered golf course. And then, Latifah would...

“So? What did you end up doing with the Kanie boy, fumo?”

“In the interest of caution, I have asked Isuzu-san to spend the night with him,” Latifah said. “She will handle any problems that might occur.”

“...You know the age that boy’s at, fumo. Isuzu’s a royal guard with a nice body. I hope there won’t be any mishaps, fumo.”

“What do you mean, ‘mishaps’?”

Moffle snorted in response. “Latifah, there are things in this world that you don’t understand. Men are wolves, fumo. They’ll shift into ‘beast mode’ at the drop of a hat, fumo.”

“Ah, I beg your pardon...” Latifah said apologetically. “What exactly is ‘beast mode’?”

There was a brief moment of silence. Moffle decided to ignore the question.

“Well,” he concluded instead, “any Lupin-type that tries to go after Isuzu will get a taste of the magic gun Steinberger, fumo.”

“Ah, forgive my repeated questions, but... What exactly is a ‘Lupin-type’?”

Another brief silence.

“You’ll understand when you grow up, fumo. Er...” Moffle let out a sigh.

“Sorry, fumo. I didn’t mean...” There was a tone of deep melancholy in the chief mascot’s voice. The idea that Latifah might ever grow up was a pipe dream.

“Not at all,” she said optimistically. “It may not be possible this year, but it will happen, some day. I am certain of that. And I have a feeling that Kanie-sama may just make something work out...”

There’s no way, Moffle thought.

Not unless a miracle happens.

And the reason we call them miracles is because they never, ever do.

[Today’s park attendance: 2,866. (100,121 from goal) / 14 days left]

Suzuran Shopping Street, Amagi Station North Entrance

Well, talking with Latifah about the fate of the park may be important, but it’s no reason to skip out on a drink after a hard day’s work. Moffle passed through the park’s service gate, caught the last bus of the night, and then walked another ten minutes from his final stop. He was heading for a small yakitori bar near the north entrance of Amagi Station.

The people he passed on the street paid him little mind. He got about as many glances as a foreigner wandering around in Roppongi. He owed that to the magical item provided to him by AmaBri: the Lalapatch Charm. As long as he wore that charm, any mascot—no matter peculiar-looking—would be treated like any other man on the street. Those charms were what let Moffle and his fellows buy lunches at convenience stores, splurge their earnings at pachinko

parlors, and buy figures in Akihabara without arousing suspicion.

An older lady closing up her cigarette shop for the night called out to Moffle as he passed. “Oh, Moffle-chan. Running a bit behind tonight, aren’t you?”

“Moffu. I had a few things to see to, fumo.” He waved his plush hand in greeting.

“By the way, my little brother and his wife sent me some pickled radishes, and I have more than I can eat. Would you mind taking some?” she asked.

“Thanks, fumo.”

“Wait right there, Moffle-chan.” She withdrew into the back of the store. Moffle was left waiting for a fair while before the woman came back with a cold pack-readied plastic bag.

“Make sure that you eat them as soon as you can,” she instructed.

“I’ll do that.” He gave her a stiff bow, then continued on his way.

Three storefronts down from the cigarette shop was the yakitori bar, “Savage.” It had been in business for a bit over 20 years. *Always that same enticing aroma wafting out from the ventilation fan, he thought nostalgically, and that same glass door, sticky with oil.*

When he entered the bar, he found Takami, the part-time worker, filling a pitcher with beer from the tap right next to the register.

“Oh, Moffle-san. Come right on in,” Takami said, her tone lacking in affectation when it came to their regulars. “Your friends are already in the back, drinking away. You want your usual Hoppy?”

“Moffu.” AmaBri’s physician had recently advised him to stay away from purines. Gout was a surprisingly common affliction among mascots in the industry—hence the Hoppy. He was trying to avoid beer as often as possible.

“While I’m here, Takami-chan, do you want some pickled radishes? They’d make a fine appetizer, fumo.”

“Oh, I already got a bunch from the lady who runs the cigarette shop...” Takami said, wincing as she saw the plastic bag dangling from Moffle’s hand.

“Ah, I thought so. No big deal, fumo.”

He passed by the counter and made his way to the small, cramped tatami room in the back. His comrades from Amagi Brilliant Park—Macaron and Tiramii—were indeed already there, drinking. It seemed it would just be the three of them tonight.

Macaron’s mug was about half empty of beer, as was Tiramii’s. They were going to town on shichimi spiced heart and chicken-and-scallion skewers.

“Munch munch... This’s great, ron! This place’s got the best chicken-and-scallion skewers in the business, ron!” Macaron declared.

Macaron was a woolly white mascot who looked like a three-heads-tall bipedal sheep. He had an adorable little face, which was currently stuffing itself with yakitori and guzzling down beer, to be followed by a deep sigh and a rapturous puff off of a cigarette. His brand, incidentally, was Marlboro—each time the cigarette tax went up, he would go on a tear about the government and Japan Tobacco.

“Just delicious, mii! That’s the flavor of hard work, mii,” Tiramii added.

Tiramii was another mascot; he looked like a sweet little Pomeranian in three-heads-tall form. He was covered in pink fur that seemed very soft, and wore both a flower ornament by his ear and a small pouch over his shoulder. All in all, it was impossible to look at him without getting a warm-and-fuzzy feeling inside.

At the moment, he was gulping down shochu on the rocks and bitching about the day’s guests. “The kid tried to kill me five times in five minutes, mii. When a five-year-old hits you for real... sheesh, you just can’t understand unless you’ve felt it, mii! It freaking hurts! I should have hit him back. No court would convict me!”

“Yeah, I hear you, ron...”

“But oh, oh—here’s the part I *really* want to talk about! The kid’s mom, mii!”

“Oh-ho?” Macaron chortled. “What was she like?”

“Hot pants in mid-March. Long legs, porcelain white. *Massive* rack. Tears in

her eyes, falling all over herself with apologies. An exquisitely aged thirty-something, mii.”

“Sexy, ron?”

“Hella sexy, mii! She’d get MILF roles in the AV industry in a heartbeat. *And* she was giving me all kinds of signals.”

“You’re gonna get shot down again, ron.”

“But she gave me her email, mii. See? ...I don’t mind older women, as long as they’re hot. And banging a kid’s mom is the best revenge, mii.”

“You’re a real creep, ron.”

The two adorable animal mascots—fluffy Pomeranian and the woolly sheep—were spewing vulgarities with beer mugs in hand. It certainly wasn’t anything they’d want a guest to overhear.

At last, the two realized that Moffle was there. “Hey, it’s Moffle, ron.”

“Took you long enough, mii!”

They raised their mugs in greeting.

“Moffu.” Moffle gave his clipped response, slipped off the fur slippers he wore as outdoor shoes, then stepped onto the tatami and knelt down. Incidentally, even with his shoes off, his feet were covered in the same fur as his shoes. ...The fact of the matter was, he’d had the outdoor shoes designed to look like his real feet. ...But then his feet were also quite large, so the shoes had to be as big as handbags to cover them, and thus, wouldn’t fit inside the usual shoe cabinets.

“...Listen up, you two. If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: Keep your conversations out of the gutter, fumo. The walls have ears and the doors have eyes... What if someone overheard you and started a play-by-play on Twitter, fumo?”

Yes, a rumor like that—“I’m here in Amagi yakitori bar ‘Savage’ and two AmaBri mascots are howling about trying to score with married women”—would be horrible if it got out. Opinion of AmaBri would plummet on the spot (although some might say it had no lower to go).

“Aw, this bar’s cool, mii. Besides, we’ve got the Lalapatch Charms,” Tiramii countered.

“You can’t even get wireless LAN or 3G signal here, ron,” Macaron added, holding up his smartphone. Both bars read “No service.”

“Be that as it may—” Moffle protested.

“Besides, our guests don’t even tweet, ron. You know how many followers I have? 128, ron.”

“.....”

128 followers. Even for a mascot of a highly unpopular amusement park, the number seemed egregiously low. Though, he’d heard it was because Macaron’s account was mainly him tweeting out “pearls of wisdom,” which caused most of his followers to eventually get annoyed and unfollow...

“What about you, Tiramii?” Moffle asked.

“I forget, mii. Probably about 200. I get blocked a lot for some reason, mii!”

In stark contrast with his cute Pomeranian-like appearance, Tiramii loved dirty jokes. And the moment he learned one of his followers was a woman, he’d start hitting on her immediately. As a result, the story went, he too had been largely abandoned by his followers.

“What about you, Moffle?” Macaron asked.

“I don’t do Twitter anymore, fumo.”

He’d made an account on the others’ recommendations, but he’d barely touched it. He’d tried following friends and others he knew too, but even that he quit after less than a month. He’d quickly grown sick of watching Macaron’s lectures and Tiramii’s ill-advised come-ons, and the others’ accounts weren’t much better.

Furthermore, reading things on Twitter was a depressing experience for him. It was just a bunch of individuals rattling off the trivial events of their lives, yet seeing all those happy tweets day in and day out made him feel like... how to put it? Like “My life is so boring compared to theirs.”

The sense of inferiority made him feel limp and deflated, like on hot, humid

nights when his fur retained moisture.

An objective appraisal would prove that each person was really only going to two or three fun events per month. Sadly, that wasn't how it looked to him. After the hundredth "Heading out!" tweet, he couldn't help feeling like everyone else was going out on the town and having fun all the time. It created the illusion of a world filled with light, in which he alone suffered in grim, dull darkness day after day.

The most pathetic part of all was the way it tempted him to compete, to post bragging "I'm living a meaningful life!" tweets. *Look at this wonderful guest we had today! Look at this wonderful experience I had! I may be facing setbacks, but I'm still giving it my all!* —Of course, none of that was true.

My life is awful. Monday mornings are the worst. Someone kill me. I wished this packed train car would explode and a meteor would hit my workplace. I hope you all die.

But could he tweet those things? Of course he couldn't.

Thus, as Moffle was not a mascot who tolerated deception, he had no choice but to remain silent.

It was around that time that part-time worker Takami brought him a bottle and a mug. "Here you are, Moffle-san. Your Black Hoppy!"

"...Moffu."

"Can I get you something to eat?" Takami asked.

"Chilled tomatoes and cold tofu," he told her. "Some yakitori, too. Your choice."

"Got it!"

As Takami left the tatami room, Tiramii gazed after her. His sweet smile, his button eyes... A small sigh escaped his mouth.

"Takami-chan... I love that junk in her trunk, mii."

"Don't you dare, you stupid mutt!" Moffle and Macaron both groaned simultaneously.

“You always, *always* go there, fumo!”

“Hitting on the part-timer got us banned from the last place, ron!”

“I-I just like to say it, mii... Don’t glare at me like that, mii...”

2. The Mascots Are Awful With Customers

When he opened his eyes, it was morning, and he was home.

“Ugh...”

Seiya sat up in his bed. He was still wearing his street clothes, including his jacket.

When did I get here? How did I make it back from that amusement park? It was all a blank.

He looked at the clock; it was a little after 7:00 AM. He’d missed his scheduled Sunday night game (an online RTS), but there was nothing to do about that but send an email apologizing to his opponents before dragging his way to the bathroom. For now, he needed to get ready for school.

He could reflect on his situation rationally while he was showering off, he thought. Meeting that girl, Latifah, in that awful theme park; the bizarre request she’d made of him; the way she’d suddenly kissed him... Could that have all been a dream?

“Ugh... What the hell is going on here?”

After staggering his way to the bathroom door, he opened it, and— He found Sento Isuzu standing in the changing room, half-naked. Actually, as a matter of fact, she was almost entirely naked. The only thing she had on were her thigh-high stockings. Her back was to him, and she was in the middle of fitting a stripe-patterned bra over the not-quite-visible curve of her breasts.

Strange priorities in getting dressed... That was his first thought. Before “*What a beautiful alabaster ass*” or “*Boy, she smells nice*” or “*Is she really into stripes?*”, that was the first thought that floated into his mind.

She has strange priorities in getting dressed. Totally naked except stockings and a bra—what kind of person puts those on first? It’s utterly inscrutable.

Only after all of that did it occur to him to wonder: why was she in the

changing room of his house, looking fresh out of the bath?



While Seiya wrestled with his silence, Isuzu glanced over her shoulder at him. Her gaze was surprisingly calm.

Before she could say anything, though, he swiftly slammed the door shut, threw himself back against the wall, and started shouting. He vaguely resembled one of those evil magistrates in a samurai drama calling for the guards.

“S-Sis! Aisu-san!”

There was a brief silence, and then Kyubu Aisu dragged herself out from her nearby bedroom.

“Mguh? ...What now?” she grumbled, “It’s first thing in the morning and I just got murdered by an all-nighter...”

He called her “Sis,” but Aisu was actually his aunt. She was 26 years old with short black hair, and wore a loose-fitting T-shirt over her very ample bosom. She was an editor for some publishing company, so she lived a highly irregular lifestyle, but though she smoked and drank a lot, her skin remained surprisingly young-looking and dewy.

“...Oh, Seiya,” she remarked. “You got yourself up, huh?”

“Sis, what the hell is *she* doing here?!” He jabbed his finger repeatedly at the door to the bathroom.

Aisu showed no sign of surprise. “She? Oh, Isuzu-chan? Did she take a bath?”

“Just answer my question!” Seiya demanded hysterically. “What’s she doing here?!”

“...She brought you here late last night,” Aisu told him. “She said something about you being on a date when you fell and hit your head? But it was probably just a concussion, so I thought I’d let you sleep it off. By then she’d missed the last train home, so I asked if she wanted to stay the night, and she was like, ‘sure.’”

Knowing Aisu, that was a fairly plausible series of events—she never paid any attention to anything besides her work, after all. She was the kind of person who, if a gang of foreign thieves showed up at two in the morning, rang the

doorbell and said, “We’re the maid service,” would just respond, “Seiya must have called for you; go right in,” then fall back into bed.

But... even so... *Even so, it’s transparently nonsense! Come on! How could you just swallow that whole story?!* Just as Seiya’s mind was focusing its ire on her, a strange thing happened.

«It’s about time Seiya started going on dates with girls. He’s really mellowed out, I guess... he used to be so hostile to any woman he met. I’m so happy! Speaking as his guardian, of course.» Aisu’s voice resonated in his mind.

Her mouth had been closed. Nevertheless, he had heard her voice, as clear as day. “What?”

Aisu, who had said nothing, responded only with a “Hmm?”

“Sis,” he asked suspiciously, “did you just talk in a weird way?”

“Huh?”

“Something about me mellowing out or something...”

Aisu started in surprise. “Wh-What? I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“You just said a bunch of stuff with your mouth closed...” Seiya accused her. “Like that I had mellowed out, that I’m hostile to women, something about speaking as my guardian...”

The surprise on her face grew even more pronounced, and she clamped a hand over her mouth. “What? I didn’t say anything. You know, you’re really creeping me out right now...”

“You’re the one creeping *me* out...” he told her angrily. “I don’t know if that was ventriloquism or what, but I don’t like people making fun of me.”

“Ventriloquism?” asked Aisu, obviously confused.

“That’s what it was, right?” Then he thought, *of course, she’d never mentioned having a skill like that.*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about... Oh, I get it,” she said, realization dawning. “I’m probably half asleep. Yeah, alcohol’s not out of my system yet... Anyway, you’re awake, so that’s all behind us... I’m going back to bed now. Get

yourself to school, okay? Later.”

Aisu rambled for a little while without giving him a word in edgewise, then withdrew into her bedroom. The door closed with a clack.

While Seiya was still staring blankly after her, the door to the bathroom opened.

“That’s interesting,” Isuzu remarked.

Seiya was surprised out of his stupor. “Huh?!”

Sento Isuzu was standing there, already dressed in her school uniform. She showed no sign of being bothered that Seiya had seen her naked.

“I overheard your conversation with your aunt,” she said. “There was only a door between us, after all.”

“...So what?”

“I think I know what your ‘magic’ is.”

It was Monday morning, so they didn’t have any time to lose. He got himself dressed, had a simple breakfast with Isuzu (Chocowa cereal and milk) and headed for school. His aunt Aisu was fast asleep in her room, so she didn’t see them off.

“So, are you going to explain or not?” Seiya asked as they walked the road from his apartment complex to Yanokuchi Station. The rapid service train going in their direction would be arriving soon, so they ended up taking a fairly fast pace.

“Of course I will,” Isuzu responded. “I start feeling like I’ll drop dead if I get fewer than three baths a day. That’s one every eight hours, more or less. After spending the night at your house, I was starting to reach the limit of what I could stand. So I used your bathroom—regrettably, without permission.”

“...Um, that’s not the explanation I was looking for...”

“I see... What did you want me to explain, then?”

“About this magic stuff!” he exploded, “and about that Latifah girl, while

you're at it!"

"Oh, that..." She nodded. "You lost consciousness when the princess, Latifah-sama, bestowed magic upon you. It was getting late, and we couldn't wake you up, so I called a taxi and brought you home."

She was still dancing around the heart of his question. "I want you to tell me about this 'magic,'" he tried again.

"Latifah-sama is the queen of the magical realm Maple Land," Isuzu explained. "The women of Maple Land's royal family have the power to bestow magical powers on ordinary human beings via mouth-to-mouth contact."

"M-Mouth-to-mouth?" he spluttered.

"It means a kiss."

"I know what it means..."

So it hadn't been a dream. *You rotten woman, give back my first kiss!* ...Actually, he didn't mind that part so much. He did wish he'd had a little more time to prepare, though... perhaps a slightly greater sense of accomplishment?

Yes, it was that same feeling of emptiness you get when you're playing an RPG and a glitch lets you beat the final boss at level three, and then you don't even get the ending screen. *It stinks! It just stinks!*

Isuzu ignored Seiya's quiet huffing and continued on calmly, "What kind of magic the royal family's kiss bestows will vary based on the person receiving it. They may gain the ability to fire beams from their eyes, to grow super-strong metal claws from their fingers, or to control storms."

"Are those really magic?" he wanted to know. Weren't those actually mutant powers or something? They all sounded familiar, at the very least...

"Those are just examples," she told him. "In your case, the magic appears to let you read people's minds. If you gaze at a person and wish for it, you can hear what they're thinking. There are stories about this in the old Maple Land records. However—"

Dubiously, Seiya gazed at Isuzu and concentrated. As if realizing what he was going for, she closed her mouth and said nothing more.

He focused. He heard a voice. It was a strange resonance in his head that felt close, and yet far away.

Sento Isuzu's thoughts read: «However—according to those records, you can only use the magic on a single person once, and you can only read their minds for a brief time. Does it work? If you can hear me, say something.»

The inner voice cut off. Isuzu stared right at him, waiting for him to respond.

“...Well,” he concluded, “It looks like it's true. I definitely could hear your thoughts. You said I can only read each person once, and for a limited time?”

“I'm glad that you catch on so quickly.”

“Hmm. It seems hard to believe,” he admitted, “but I don't think you could be faking it...”

All this talk about magic might have seemed like nonsense, but Seiya took it relatively in stride. Given the amount of strange phenomena he'd been experiencing these last two days, he'd given up on trying to find realistic, logical bases for everything he came across.

Magic that let him read minds, eh?

Fine. Let's just say the power existed and that he had it. In that case, the first thing he had to do was test that power and get a feel for its limits.

Arguing with himself over every little thing wouldn't get him anywhere; he had to face reality and get some information that he could use! Of course, he would have preferred magic that let him control gravity, or perfectly copy another person's powers... but he opted not to voice those complaints.

So, he thought, *let's test it one more time!* He stared at Isuzu once again, trying to peer into her mind. But no matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't hear her voice again.

“.....”

“It appears my suspicions were correct,” she said. “You can't read my mind anymore, can you?”

“...How can you be so sure? Maybe I'm just pretending like I can't.” He was saying it partly out of spite, but Isuzu wasn't fazed.

“You’re not—” she denied confidently.

“Oh?”

“—because I was thinking something incredibly obscene just now.”

“Wh... What?” *Obscene? What kind of obscene?!*

“Just kidding,” Isuzu added.

“Rrgh...”

“But this does confirm it,” she finished thoughtfully. “You didn’t know that I was lying. In other words, you can only read each person once... That much is clear.”

“Grrr...”

So her tactics were impeccable; he’d have to be on his guard around her. There was their back-and-forth at the snack shop yesterday, too... He might have to keep a tight rein on his emotions around her from now on.

There was another way in which he regretted his carelessness, though.

He’d wasted his “one time only” magic on her already... If he’d timed it more carefully, he might have gotten some proper blackmail material.

“...Kanie-kun. You’re feeling disappointed that you couldn’t get blackmail material on me, aren’t you?”

“W-Wait... you don’t have that power too, do you?”

“No. It just seemed likely, given your behavior in our previous interactions.”

“Grr...”

I really hate acting, Seiya thought bitterly. It’s a little late for it now, but—

“F-Fine... Let me test it a little more.” Trying it on one person wasn’t positive proof.

He tried the power out on a middle-aged office worker walking beside them on his way to the station. It was just a man he’d seen around from time to time—it wouldn’t be a problem to never read his mind again.

He heard the man’s voice. «Ahh, I’m so tired. I got out of the house late, and

I've probably missed my usual train... Which means I won't see that pretty clerk today. She's my one point of light in a hellish commute...»

Whatever. He then read the mind of a middle-aged woman in a suit, who was walking behind the man.

«...Did I program the DVR right? If I call now, maybe I can get Takeshi to check it before he goes to school. But Takeshi hates Korean dramas, which makes it so awkward to ask him... What will I do?»

Seriously whatever. He then tried an ordinary-looking boy behind her. He was dressed in a uniform for another school, his eyes glued to a notebook as he walked— «...Congress of Vienna, 1914. Congress of Vienna, 1914. Congress of Vienna, 1914. Congress of Vienna, 1914...»

Not whatever at all! *The Congress of Vienna was 1814 to 1815! It was a crucial conference between the nations of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars! How could you mistake it for 1914? That's a century off! That's World War I!* He ground his teeth, longing to object. Longing to point out the boy's mistake...

After choking down the urge, he tried using his “magic” once more on the same subjects—the office worker, the older woman, the student—but he couldn't read any of their minds any more.

“...It seems you're correct, Sento,” he finally admitted. “I only get one try per person, and I can only read their minds for a short time.”

“The Maple Land records speak of people in the past who had that sort of power,” she answered briefly.

“Hmm.” If he had learned one new thing from all this, it was that the power didn't allow him to actually see people's names. He didn't know the kanji behind the woman's (probable) son, Takeshi.

In other words, the magic didn't let him literally “read” the person's mind; he was just hearing their thoughts. And he only got one shot per person. With limitations like that, it would be a difficult power to abuse.

They were getting close to Yanokuchi Station; the area around it was badly run-down, with almost no shops. There was a cleaners and a green grocer, plus a pub and a yakitori bar aimed at the local men. To the south of the station was

undeveloped mountain forest.

These were the outskirts of the Tokyo commuter town Amagi, right on the border of Kanagawa Prefecture. Although they were a mere 30 minute ride to Shinjuku, it would be a stretch to call it part of the city; It was a suburb.

After passing through the ticket gate, Seiya spoke up again. “I still have a lot of questions. What’s this ‘Maple Land’ thing?”

“It’s a magical realm that lies on the threshold between the sea and the land,” said Isuzu.

“So I’ve heard,” he replied pointedly. “Now tell me the truth.”

“That is the truth.”

She’s apparently going to insist on this whole ‘magical realm’ line, then. Fine, whatever.

“But all you need to worry about, for now, is coming back to Brilliant Park with me after school,” she said. “The fact that you passed out meant we weren’t able to discuss our plan of action.”

Seiya protested her suggestion, naturally, but when he found a musket pointed at him on the station platform, he decided that agreeing with her was his safest bet.

After arriving at school, Seiya spent all day in class biting back his anger. Things were further exacerbated by the fact that someone, somehow, had leaked a rumor about him and Isuzu. He’d been eating his lunch in a lavatory stall when he overheard some students come in who were talking about it.

The account was that a first-year girl had witnessed Kanie Seiya and Sento Isuzu meet up in front of Amagi Station and get on a bus together. The report was that the bus was the one that went to Hotel Alamo. The fact was that the next morning, the two had walked to school together, looking “awfully friendly” — *You’ve got to be kidding me!*

He wanted to burst out of the stall and yell at them, but he was stymied by the fact that he was eating his lunch in a bathroom stall. If he wanted to

preserve any scrap of his reputation, he couldn't afford to come out now.

You know, THE Kanie Seiya... With no friends! All alone!! In a toilet stall!! Eating curry bread!!—The thought was unacceptable.

After a few more teeth-gritting hours, Seiya ended up at Amagi Brilliant Park once again. Isuzu had been waiting for him outside school after class, and had mercilessly pulled him along with her.

“So?” Seiya asked after they'd passed through the cast entrance next to the gate. “Where are you dragging me off to today?”

Rather than answering, Isuzu was wordlessly pecking at her cell phone. She seemed to be checking her email, and typing out a short reply to someone. Her style of typing was incredibly slow and clumsy.

“Hey.”

“.....”

“If you're going to check your email while someone's talking to you, you could at least say you're sorry. Didn't your parents teach you anything?”

“.....”

“No response, huh? I think I'll go home, then.” Seiya turned on his heel and was proceeding towards the exit when he felt an iron hand on his collar. “Hey!”

“How do you create 'emojis?’” Isuzu showed him her cellphone screen.

Re: They're here, fumo

Understood. I'm at the first gate.

I'm bringing Kanie-kun.

From: Moffle

To: Sento Isuzu

The Amagi Development guys are here, fumo.

I'm sending them to conference room three, fumo. Get there ASAP

It was an email that raised quite a lot of questions, Seiya thought.

First, there was the fact that the email was from Moffle. That was the mascot he'd had the fight with the day before. Why was someone sending business emails under the mascot's name? "Amagi Development guys" was an odd set of words, too. And that speech tic... "They're here, fumo." Why?

Shelving his various questions for now, though, Seiya decided to address hers. "...I don't really understand any of this," he told her, "but are you trying to put an emoji after 'I'm bringing Kanie-kun?'"

Isuzu nodded.

"What kind of emoji?" he asked.

"I want one that looks like I'm smiling and waving."

"Okay..." he told her, "hand it over for a minute."

I'm bringing Kanie-kun. :)

"Will that do it?"

"Hmm... it's passable," she decided.

What kind of reaction was that? Seiya wondered. *What kind of emoji would be better than "passable," then?*

But all that aside—

"So, where are you taking me?" he wanted to know.

"You saw the email, didn't you? To conference room three."

"Why?"

"To meet with the people from Amagi Development," Isuzu explained.

"And Amagi Development is...?"

"Our enemy."

There was a squat building on the other side of the amusement park.

Conference room three was on its third floor, and was a plain-looking room, with no distinguishing features. It housed a faded conference table, which was surrounded by folding chairs, and a dingy-looking whiteboard.

The so-called “enemy” Isuzu mentioned had already arrived.

There were three of them: Two unremarkable older men, with a younger man standing in between them. The attractive young man in the middle seemed to be in his mid-twenties, and was probably around the same age as Seiya’s aunt Aisu.

All three were wearing matching, tasteful gray suits that appeared to be very expensive. They carried themselves less like businessmen, and more like a squadron of soldiers who had just deciphered their enemy’s plan. The smiles they wore were smug and imperious.

The young man gave Seiya a glance, then introduced himself: “I’m Kurisu Takaya from Amagi Development,” he said as he held out his business card. It was a simple one.

Unfortunately, Seiya didn’t have any business cards. He introduced himself and bowed politely.

Kurisu’s smile remained firmly in place as he sized Seiya up. “Nice to meet you. What’s this student doing here?”

“He’s an intern. He’s here to take the minutes,” Isuzu explained.

“I see,” Kurisu said. “...An intern, eh? Where’s your manager, Latifah-san?”

Isuzu was the only park representative in the room. There was no one else there. Seiya had assumed that the (guy inside of the?) high-and-mighty mascot Moffle would be there, but it seemed he wasn’t.

Isuzu responded politely. “As I mentioned in our email, our manager is feeling ill and won’t be here today. As acting manager, I will be humbly standing in for her.”

“I see,” Kurisu said coldly. “Very well.”

Seiya was surprised to see Kurisu Takaya agree to this so readily—it wouldn't have been out of line for him to complain about coming all the way out here, only to be forced to deal with the likes of Isuzu and Seiya. The other two men did seem to be thinking something along those lines, but one glance from Kurisu and they swallowed their grievances.

Kurisu seemed to be the one in charge, and after a moment's pause, he spoke: "...So, acting manager Isuzu-san. I believe you're aware of the circumstances that bring us here today? If you can't meet the attendance quota within the next two weeks, ownership of Amagi Brilliant Park will transfer to Amagi Development."

"...Yes," Isuzu responded without a fragment of emotion.

"According to the contract our interests signed back in 1982, if you have five years with a park attendance below one million, the park's management rights transfer to Amagi Development. Accordingly—"



Kurisu Takaya continued his explanation as he flipped through copies of the contract and business figures for the past several years. He talked on and on about commercial law and third sector regulations, and while it was quite long and boring, Seiya managed to grasp the general situation: in short, the amusement park was on the verge of closing.

Amagi Development was a major shareholder that the city and various companies invested in. They wanted to close the “dodgy” theme park, and according to the contract, if the park’s attendance fell below a certain number, management rights would fall to them.

The deadline was two weeks from now, and the park was 100,000 people short of the quota.

Though they were still undecided as to whether the park was to be replaced with a golf course or housing, either way, the park was definitely getting torn down.

100,000 people in just two weeks? It was an insurmountable task. Amagi Brilliant Park was going to close in two weeks, plain and simple, and this man, Kurisu Takaya, had come to discuss the process for making the transition a smooth one.

“Now, as far as I can tell... you haven’t made any preparations to close the park,” Kurisu was saying. “You haven’t announced the closing and you haven’t canceled your phone, internet, and water contracts. We can’t help but wonder if you’re really acting in good faith, here... Could you please provide an explanation for this?”

“Well...” Isuzu muttered. “...It’s because we don’t know for certain that the park won’t meet its quota, yet.”

A strained smile appeared on Kurisu’s face. “Don’t know for certain? Surely you jest; you’re deep in the red. You’ve squandered your funding, and you’re dragging others down with you. Look... the time has come, that’s all. You should take this dying anachronism off of life support, and then focus on getting your assets in order and making up your losses in a productive way.”

“We are... aware of the situation,” Isuzu said stiffly.

“Are you really?” Kurisu sounded incredulous. “I know a lot about your kind—excuse me, about people like you. You think ‘accounting is boring, who cares?’ right? You think only ‘artistic’ endeavors have value. You think caring about profit is a crime in and of itself.”

“We aren’t saying that,” she protested.

“You effectively are. Even an amusement park is still a business, you know. Do you realize how much of a burden your business puts on people? Shall I explain it to you in no small terms? Yes, let’s take an example—” Kurisu picked up a fountain pen and started pecking at a calculator with it.

“Let’s take an average family of four that visits your amusement park on a given Sunday. They have a yearly income of about four million yen—a totally unremarkable modern family who’s just made it to the point where they can go to an amusement park a few times a year.”

“...So?” Isuzu scoffed.

“That’s our basic premise. Now, based on Amagi Brilliant Park’s attendance last year, how much would this family have to spend per visit to get you in the black? Let’s have a look—” The taps of the calculator echoed through the room.

Feeling otherwise bored, Seiya began to run the rough numbers in his head. Then, like he was watching a quiz show, he whispered his conclusion out loud: “85,000 yen.”

Kurisu, who had only just finished his calculations, widened his eyes. The men flanking him did the same.

“Excuse me?” he asked Seiya.

“85,000 yen,” Seiya mused. “It’s just a rough guess.”

Kurisu looked at Seiya with a newly penetrating gaze. “That’s just about right. 83,200 yen, specifically.”

“Huh...” He’d gotten it surprisingly close, though if he’d known whether the park generated any of its own power, he could have come up with a more precise number.

“Not quite on the mark, but still impressive, student,” Kurisu complimented

him. “Why not give up your internship here and join us instead?” He said it in a way that made it hard to tell if he was joking or not. The men on either side of him knitted their brows, while Isuzu scowled.

“No,” Seiya said slowly, “I think I’ll pass...”

“That’s too bad. We could really help you make the most of your gifts.” Kurisu shrugged. “...Well, anyway, that’s the math. How much would your customers have to pay to support your little pastime? The answer is 83,200 yen per family. I think you’ll agree that it’s an absurd amount.”

Seiya had to agree; you could take a trip overseas for that money. No family would spend 80,000 yen a day at a dodgy amusement park like this.

“You’d have to be mad to place such a burden upon a budgeting family,” Kurisu accused. “...Now, here comes my next question—are you providing a service worthy of that kind of money?”

The answer to that one is obvious... Seiya was about to murmur, but caught himself just in time. Sento Isuzu just fixed her eyes on the ground, seemingly unable to reply.

“Well... if we could just... have a little more time, one last chance...” she whispered at last, haltingly.

Seiya looked over at her and saw that her expression was its usual sour one. Her voice didn’t tremble, nor did it make an appeal to emotion. For some reason, Seiya found it reminiscent of a commander in the field being scolded by his general over and over: “Why can’t you just break the enemy ranks?”

“...Well, if you insist,” Kurisu finally said. “The people who come here are all idiots, anyway.”

“.....!” Isuzu gasped. She seemed to want to retort fiercely, but was somehow managing to hold herself back. Instead, she just lowered her voice and turned the question back on him. “Did you say... idiots?”

“Am I wrong?” Kurisu retorted.

Yes, this isn’t looking good at all... Just as that thought entered Seiya’s mind, Isuzu’s hand went to her skirt; she must have been going for that strange

musket of hers. Before she could draw it, Seiya gently grabbed her wrist and leaned forward.

“I see. We definitely understand what you’re saying,” Seiya replied with an amiable smile on his face. “...You’re right to point out that we haven’t begun preparations for our closing yet. That’s because we were just about to begin them. ...Isn’t that right, Sento-san?”

Isuzu’s expression remained blank for a moment, but she came back to herself, and barely managed to nod.

Kurisu studied their expressions intently for a moment, then let out a small sigh. “That didn’t appear to be the case, so I just wanted to be sure. ...Well, if you’ll excuse us.”

The three men from Amagi Development tidied up their documents, and left the conference room.

Once the men were gone, Isuzu spoke. “Why did you stop me?”

“Stop you from what?” Seiya asked, though he was fairly certain he knew.

“That man insulted our guests,” she said heatedly. “I tried to pull out my magical gun, but you stopped me.”

“Yeah,” he retorted, “that’s common sense.” *What are you even talking about?*

“Ah... I suppose I was being rash. I couldn’t think of anything but blowing the heads off those Amagi Development people.”

“We’d be in real trouble if you had.”

“Yes...” Isuzu sighed. “...It would have been a lot of trouble to clean the conference room of three heads’ worth of scattered skull and brain bits. I’m glad I didn’t kill them.”

“*That’s* what you’re taking from this?” he asked incredulously. *What is wrong with you?* On top of that, it was hard to imagine what, exactly, she was so mad about.

“All that aside,” Isuzu admitted, “you intrigue me.”

“How so?”

“That number you reached. 85,000 yen—it was quite precise. Did you read Kurisu Takaya’s mind?”

“Certainly not,” Seiya smiled with a wince. Of course he hadn’t used that dubious “magic.” He’d just posited the number based off of things he’d heard earlier.

He didn’t know the park’s attendance figure from last year, nor their running annual costs, so he’d fallen back on a method proposed by physicist Enrico Fermi; it was a thought experiment known as the “Fermi Estimate.”

You could use it to come up with rough estimates by throwing together the numbers you did know. How many piano tuners there were in a certain metropolitan area, for instance—you couldn’t know the exact number, but you could make an educated guess.

(We’ll leave out a detailed explanation of where he got those numbers, since it would take about eight pages to go through it all, and it would also be boring.) “I did a rough estimate, that’s all; it was just luck that it happened to be so close to his own calculation.”

“...I see.”

“Anyway, if I was going to read the mind of someone like that, I’d use it for something more important. That goes double since I can only use it once per person.”

“I see... Of course, you’re right.” Isuzu whispered, her eyes downturned. There was something timid in her voice.

“...So? Why did you want me to meet those guys, anyway?” Seiya asked.

“I wanted you... to know the enemy.”

“You’re still acting under the ridiculous assumption that I’m going to be your manager, then?”

“Yes. That’s why I brought you here.”

“Enough.” Seiya had hit the limits of his patience. He slammed his hand down on the conference table and stared straight into Isuzu’s eyes. She wouldn’t

meet his gaze, but kept her eyes forward, staring at a random point on the wall.

“You threaten me with that ridiculous gun, you steal my precious free time, including a whole Sunday...” he accused. “You even know what an inconvenience you’ve been to me, yet you have the nerve to ask me to help you out? Do you not realize how contemptuous that is?”

Isuzu had nothing to say.

“Let’s get it all out on the table, then,” he said flatly. “What happens if I say no? You’ll kill me?”

“Well...” Her voice was low and hard to hear, but she made no sign of reaching for her weapon.

An awkward silence hung over the conference room. Far in the distance, he could hear the clatter of the roller coaster.

At length, Isuzu spoke. “I was never... going to kill you.”

“Oh?” *Of course she wasn’t. It would be ridiculous to kill someone over something like this.*

“I was born into a long line of Maple Land soldiers,” she said stiffly. “I’ve spent my entire life undergoing grueling training so that I could join the royal guard and protect the royal family.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t know how to ask a mortal like you for help.”

“Hence the gun?”

“Yes. Incidentally, the gun’s name is...” She reached under her skirt again and drew her musket back out. “The magical gun, Steinberger. It’s been handed down through generations in my family. It can fire magic bullets that have a variety of effects; right now, it’s loaded with rounds known as ‘Pain Bringer.’ Being hit by one will hurt about twice as much as stubbing your little toe on the dresser.”

“So, it just hurts?”

“Yes. Do you want to try it?”

“No.” Seiya drew back as he found the muzzle pointed at him again.

“It’s okay,” she encouraged him. “You won’t die.”

“I still don’t want to be in pain!” Seiya protested. “Stubbing your little toe on the dresser hurts a lot!”

“The point is, I was never going to kill you.” Isuzu stowed her gun again. “The park is already so desperate for competent people that they’ve been forced to employ me as a negotiator.”

“Why can’t you hire a lawyer or a professional administrator?” He wanted to know.

“We have, but we lost them. They all quit.”

“Why?”

Isuzu turned her eyes downward abruptly. “Because... I threatened them with my magical gun.”

“Hey!”

“I regret what I’ve done,” she admitted. “The only reason the police weren’t called in was because I used my magical bullets, ‘Forgotten Realm.’ It made them forget that I threatened them.”

Those bullets sound useful, Seiya thought. I wish you’d erase my memories of the last few days.

“It was Latifah-sama’s revelation that chose you, but I think you have even greater potential than she knows. Please think about it.”

Seiya let out a long sigh, and stood up.

“Are you leaving?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said bluntly. “Got a problem with that?”

“I want your answer,” Isuzu demanded.

“You know my answer. It’s ‘no.’” *What good can I possibly do as a manager of a theme park with just two weeks left to live? Getting the books in order would be the upper limit.* He left the conference room and strode down the hallway, with Isuzu in pursuit.

“Even though I’m begging you?” she asked.

“When did you ever beg me?”

“We gave you magic.”

“Which is something I never asked for,” he said acidly. “Oh, don’t worry—I won’t abuse it. I might use it to kill time on the train, at most.”

That much he meant sincerely; he didn’t want or need that power. Maybe he couldn’t quite land that 85,000 yen figure, but even without magic, he was smart enough to get close.

“Kanie-kun, you’re our last hope,” she begged. “Please, save us.”

“I will not.” Seiya pressed the call button for the elevator at the end of the hall, then turned around. “Close down the park immediately. Fire the staff. Use whatever money you have left to open up a croquette shop or something with that girl. That’s your most constructive option right now.”

The elevator arrived.

“Wait,” she pleaded. “At least see Latifah-sama one last time before you go.”

That smile. That beautiful, delicate girl’s smile... The fragrance of the black tea arose at the back of his mind and he felt a pang in his chest.

“...How many times do I need to say it? No.” He tapped B2 for the underground passageway, then held the “close doors” button.

The closing elevator doors seemed to form a wall between Seiya and Isuzu.

Turning down someone’s request like that didn’t feel great. With uncertainty still swimming in his mind, Seiya made the long walk down the park’s underground passage and arrived at the employee entrance. He handed in his visitor’s ID at the security center, slapped his signature on the sign-out sheet, then left the park.

He had just found the bus stop that would take him towards Amagi Station when he noticed a man standing in front of the sign. It was Kurisu Takaya, one of the men he’d met in the conference room—one of the men from Amagi Development. The two older men he’d been with at the time were gone now;

he must have sent them on ahead.

The man had a cigarette in one hand and a portable ashtray in the other. His tie was pulled loose, and he seemed to be gazing at some point far in the distance. In this moment, he seemed like any ordinary businessman that you might find anywhere.

Seiya didn't really want to get near him, but this was the only bus stop in the area. They had already made eye contact too, so he just gave the man a small nod and then stood beside him. According to the timetable at the stop, the bus should arrive in about five minutes.

They stood there for about a minute before Seiya realized that Kurisu was casting frequent, questioning glances in his direction. At first, he pretended not to notice, but it started getting under his skin after a while, until he finally snapped, "What?"

"Oh, well..." Kurisu peered more closely into Seiya's face. "It might just be my imagination, but have we met before?"

"...No," Seiya finally replied. "It's definitely just your imagination."

"Hmm, well, maybe we haven't *met*, but I do feel like I've seen you somewhere. ...Oh, I know! Kodama Seiya! The child performer who retired five or six years back!"

"....." Seiya felt his stomach sink.

He'd grown since he was a child, and his face had changed a lot. He was taller, with a different hairstyle and a nastier disposition. His voice had changed (naturally) and he'd moved from a high-class residential district to the middle-class Tokyo commuter town of Amagi. He'd even changed his surname.

But despite all that, he was still recognized from time to time.

Even since entering high school, he'd been through this dance two or three times. It was usually an old lady behind the fast food counter, or a checkout clerk at the supermarket, or a door-to-door missionary for a new religion... never anybody at his school; always middle-aged women. Maybe raising their own children had given them an instinct for how a boy's face would change over the years.

This, then, was his first time being singled out by a man like Kurisu.

“You’re mistaken,” he said dismissively, but Kurisu shook his head.

“No, no, I’m not mistaken. You’re Kodama Seiya. I even thought you looked familiar when we met earlier. So it *is* you!”

“It’s not,” Seiya rebuffed him, but the man’s expression of certainty didn’t waver. Realizing it was ridiculous to keep up the act, Seiya decided to stop denying it. “...but assuming I was him, do you have some business with a washed-up celebrity?”

“No, none in particular,” Kurisu admitted. “Just indulging my curiosity.”

“Leave me alone, then.”

“Hmm, my apologies. But... she said you were an intern, didn’t she? What are you doing here?”

“Good question. That’s what I’d like to know,” he snapped back, but Kurisu was unfazed by his hostility. “They said they wanted me to have a look at you Amagi Development guys... They wanted me to work there, I guess, but I already turned them down. I value my privacy these days. So could you please leave me alone?”

He wasn’t lying about feeling that way.

He didn’t care about the ins and outs of some failing amusement park. It didn’t matter to him what happened to Latifah or Isuzu. All he wanted to do right now was to go home and immerse himself in his video games.

The bus to Amagi Station was pulling up.

“Well, I’m sure you have your reasons. But one point of caution, in case you get any foolish ideas—if you spend too much time with losers, you’ll become a loser. Be careful.”

“Sure, thanks,” Seiya replied dismissively. At the same time, he couldn’t keep himself from voicing a counter-argument. “...You’d know what you’re talking about, as the guy in charge of liquidating a failed amusement park in the backends of Tokyo.”

“Hmm, touche.” Contrary to Seiya’s expectations, Kurisu responded with a

bright smile. It was unlike the polite smile he'd been wearing up to this point; a complicated smile, with a trace of self-recrimination in it.

The bus stopped in front of them, and the door opened. Kurisu got on board, but Seiya remained where he was.

"Kanie-kun, wasn't it?" Kurisu asked. "Aren't you getting on?"

"I'll catch the next one. I'd rather not have to look at your face any longer."

"Oh dear, dear. Did I hurt your feelings? Ah well, take care." The door closed. The bus drove off, and disappeared around the gentle bends of the public road.

Seiya watched Kurisu Takaya's bus leave, then checked the timetable again; ten minutes until the next bus arrived.

Even for a failing amusement park, it's ridiculous for buses to only run to the front gate every ten minutes, he thought. This is the Tokyo suburbs, not some isolated spot in the country. Then again—maybe it's an appropriate pace, given their typical attendance...

He looked around to see if there was anywhere to sit. There was nothing nearby, not even a plain old bench. He'd just have to wait for the bus while standing. Nowhere to sit for the parents and their children, tired from walking around the park all day...

Actually—

Quite a ways back from the stop itself, in the corner of an open area near the park gate, sat a few handmade benches. They were over ten meters away from the bus stop.

Ahh, I see...

It was because the bus stop was on a public road. Even if the park wanted to put benches near the bus stop, the city probably wouldn't allow it. That's why the park had to put their handful of benches so far away—they had to be on their own property.

Seiya trudged over to one of the benches. As he sat down on it, it let out a dubious squeak. Who had made these things? They looked very cheap;

probably made by a hobbyist craftsman in his spare time.

Their edges were rounded, with the corners carefully sanded down. Consideration for the children playing nearby, most likely—just in case they hit their heads. Then, perhaps to entertain the children bored from waiting, they had painted sloppy art of the mascots on the wall behind the benches.

If you have time to make stuff like this, why can't you keep the entry plaza clean? he wondered.

Still, their hearts were in the right place. It was a humble bit of consideration for the people visiting the park, just like those croquettes.

What was it that that annoying man—Kurusu Takaya—had said? Their visitors were idiots. And just minutes ago, he had said something else: If you spend too much time with losers, you'll become a loser.

I can't exactly deny it...

Yes, he couldn't deny it. The man's comments, regarding the business side of things, were entirely correct. Normally, Seiya would have joined him in a laugh, and that would be that.

The people of Amagi Brilliant Park weren't putting in the necessary effort. They were getting what they deserved. They had no right to complain about what was happening to them now. And yet...

Why am I sitting here on this lousy handmade bench, feeling upset about the situation? Am I angry that they're the kind of people who call visitors fools and other people losers? Am I just uncomfortable with the idea of a world where people like them can throw their weight around?

In two weeks, this park would close. That was a natural thing. But was that really okay? Was there really nothing he could do?

About ten minutes passed as his thoughts chased themselves around and around in circles. The next thing he knew, the bus had arrived. A few people were getting on board. He was close enough that if he started walking right now, he could catch it.

But Seiya didn't. He turned away from the bus, and walked back through the

employee entrance he'd come out of.

After closing that day, an announcement over business channels said, "Real cast, meet up in the rooftop garden." 'Real cast' referred to residents of Maple Land (and other magical lands) who were working here in the mortal realm. Moffle was one of them, as were Macaron, Tiramii, and Sento Isuzu. Employees from the mortal realm were simply referred to as 'cast.'

So the time's finally come, Moffle thought as he tidied up his attraction.

Latifah and Isuzu had an important announcement for the real cast? It was sure to be bad news.

On his way to Maple Castle, he ran into Macaron, the woolly sheep-like mascot, who was Moffle's longest acquaintance in the park.

"Hello there, 'Fairy of Sweets,'" Macaron teased.

"Shut your mouth. You're the 'Fairy of Music,' fumo," Moffle shot back.

It's a pathetic thing to still be doing at your age, they both seemed to be saying.

"Fairy of Sweets" though he may be, Moffle had no real fondness for sweet things. If pressed, he'd say he liked salami and such—at which point he'd be told that that wasn't a sweet, it was a drinking snack.

Macaron styled himself the "Fairy of Music," but he had no interest in children's songs. His favorite genres were funk and rap—particularly American gangsta rap, with its graphic descriptions of sex and violence. "I popped a 9mm cap in a rival gang leader with my Glock 19," or "Let me tell you about this hottie with big tits," and the like.

"You got pretty wasted last night. Everything okay, ron?"

"Hardly. It's all a blank after the second bar, fumo..."

Last night, he, Macaron, and another of their associates—the "Fairy of Flowers," Tiramii—had gotten drunk off their asses at an after-work party. They'd started out the night with inconsequential gossip, but the subject had soon turned to the future of the park, and then the mood had turned bleak.

Moffle had blacked out shortly after, only to awaken the next morning in his kitchen at home. For some reason, he'd been lying flat on the floor, covered in cold spaghetti. Fighting back the headache and the nausea, he'd washed himself off and was about to head for work when he'd found an empty package of ready-made carbonara sauce in his mailbox. *Where'd the sauce go?* he'd wondered. *Into my own stomach*, he'd figured. It had been a long time since he'd gotten plastered that badly.

"Moffle, you did nothing but talk about Latifah, ron."

"Did I, fumo?"

"Part of it was about the curse, but then some stuff about her kissing the kid chosen by her revelation... you just went on and on and on... You were in tears by the end of it, ron."

"Moffu," he swore. "Was I?"

"You were," Macaron said sympathetically.

"Well... I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble. I hope you can forget whatever I said, fumo..."

Macaron patted Moffle lightly on the back. "Moffle. We don't mind it when you get drunk, because you never speak badly of people. When you're drunk, you only speak well of everyone."

"Do I, fumo?"

"You even said the kid had guts, ron."

"I doubt that. I'd never compliment that little wimp, fumo."

"Well, feel free to think that, ron." His wool quivering with squeaky laughs, Macaron boarded the elevator to the rooftop garden, and Moffle followed him. Five or six other members of the real cast ran to catch it, and soon, the elevator was packed.

"Um... Moffle-san..." a girl with butterfly wings on her back addressed him hesitantly.

This girl, who wore a very revealing dress, was the fairy, Muse. She did a musical act in Sorcerer's Hill, the same area where Moffle worked. She was a

very hard worker, despite her youth.

“Yes, fumo?”

“They don’t usually call us all out together like this. Do you think... it’s bad news?”

The elevator fell deathly silent. Everyone was watching Moffle’s expression closely. Moffle was a veteran, related to Latifah, and had connections to the Maple Land royal family. His response would determine the mood of the rest of the real cast.

He glanced at Macaron, but his friend—who at once seemed to have intuited this, but also didn’t want to be bothered about it—just nodded back as if to say, “It’s up to you.”

“...I haven’t heard anything, fumo,” Moffle finally said.

“R-Really? But...”

“Well, it’s probably just what you’re expecting, fumo.” Those were his last words on the subject. When the elevator arrived at the top floor, the people on board filed out into the rooftop garden.

Once the anxious-looking Muse and the others had moved far enough away, Macaron whispered to Moffle, “Moffle. You could have handled that better, ron.”

“You’re one to talk, fumo. You shouldn’t have put it all on me.”

“I know... but the young people are counting on you. You can’t be so cavalier, ron.”

“Sugar-coating the situation won’t change the park’s future, fumo.”

“Maybe not, but...”

The two proceeded into the rooftop garden.

Maple Castle’s rooftop garden was as beautiful as it had ever been. Most of the real cast had assembled by now, and nervous whispers could be heard here and there. It wasn’t all people born in the fairy tale-like Maple Land. Some had come here on transfer from other magical realms.

Moffle and Macaron staked out a corner of the garden and waited for the conference to start. Tiramii, the lecherous Pomeranian mascot, arrived soon afterward, and sat down next to them. He said, “Hey, good to see you guys, mii. You think tonight’s the night we throw in the towel, mii?”

“Probably. Well, 30 years isn’t a bad run for a failing amusement park, ron.”

“Not 30 years. It’s 29 years, fumo,” Moffle said in a strained voice.

This park, founded on the abundant wealth of the bubble economy of the 80s, would have been thirty years old next year. That would never happen, now.

“Attention! Attention!” A feminine voice echoed through the garden.

Sento Isuzu, dressed in the park’s uniform, was shouting down at them from a terrace one floor up. She was looking down on the cast in the garden like an actor on a stage.

“Attention, cast of the glorious Amagi Brilliant Park! First Princess of Maple Land, descendant of our nation’s founder, Slim, Priestess of the Revelation, and our esteemed manager, Latifah Fleuranza, will now speak! You will give her your full attention!” Her voice was penetrating, yet stately. Had the audience been members of the Maple Land military, they likely would have straightened their uniforms and stood at attention.

But the real cast around Moffle was unimpressed.

(She thinks she’s so hot...)

(Is now really the time for pomp and circumstance?)

(She’s just going to announce that we’re closing...) There were a variety of reactions: some whispered, some grumbled, and some spoke up unashamedly. The brunt of their quiet antipathy was directed at Sento Isuzu.

Of course, that stood to reason.

Sento Isuzu had been dispatched here one year ago by the king to serve as Latifah’s adviser and executor, yet the fact that they were now in this situation made it clear that she hadn’t done one lick of good. “Elite member of the royal guard” was a grand title, but at the end of the day she was a soldier, and nothing more. There was no way someone with her background could

understand the business of running a theme park, or the ins and outs of the entertainment industry.

It wasn't that Isuzu wasn't trying. But with the tyrannical way she'd ordered everyone around, it hadn't taken long before she'd lost the support of the cast. She interacted with guests while standing at attention, threatened slacking cast members with her gun, and made no excuses to the investors. She was an excellent officer, to be sure, but those qualities weren't what made a park function.

All people had their strengths and weaknesses. Isuzu wasn't cut out for this kind of work, but in a job where barking orders was called for, she'd surely have been quite at home.

"In the name of all the spirits—Your Highness! We await your words!" Sento Isuzu's ceremonious manner was quite unlike her usual indifference.

Of course, that's a soldier for you, Moffle thought, being a former soldier himself.

Latifah appeared from the back of the terrace. Her body was so frail, it was painful to see. Her beautiful dress and her closed eyes— Moffle suddenly felt the urge to take her place, to explain the situation to the crowd himself.

Latifah borrowed Isuzu's hand at first, then placed her fingertips on the rail of the terrace. Then, after managing to hold herself up under her own power, she spoke.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," Latifah said in a cheerful voice.

They all knew what was coming. She was just trying to tell them in her own way, with a smile, to spare their feelings.

"I fear that the tidings I have to offer are sad ones. Two weeks from now, Amagi Brilliant Park will be torn down..."

The response was a collective sigh from every corner of the garden.

"The reason for this is that we failed to meet our guest attendance quota this year. Our contract states that if we fail to meet this quota five years in a row, we must give up administration of the park, and transfer control over the

facilities and land to the property management company, Amagi Development.”

A painful silence hung over the garden. Everyone knew the story.

“The time limit is nearly upon us. I have determined that, in the park’s current condition, and with only two weeks remaining, it will be impossible to achieve the attendance we need. That is why... everyone...” Latifah hesitated for a moment. “...We must say goodbye to this park at once. I shall do what I can to find employment for you beginning in April. I know that this will be a trying time, but...”

“Trying? Trying, pii?!” a member of the real cast squealed from the crowd. All eyes fell on the speaker of the protest.

It had come from a lizard-like mascot named Wanipii. He was a character who worked in Wild Valley, the area next to Sorcerer’s Hill. He wasn’t “cuddly” like Moffle and his friends; he had sunken features, and a big mouth that had a long tongue dangling from it. He had a comical, so-ugly-it’s-cute appearance, and he was mainly popular with foreign park-goers.

“Latifah-sama! Don’t you know how hard it’s gonna be for me, pii?! I got almost no name recognition! There’s no way I’ll get popular somewhere else, pii!”

“You cannot know that for certain,” she replied earnestly. “If you would apply yourself—”

“Applying myself won’t do squat, pii!” Wanipii’s voice was close to a shriek. “I’ll get stuck handing out tissue packs at some station somewhere, pii! People will forget me, I’ll run out of *animus*... and then I’ll disappear, pii! It’s *monos*, pii!”

A stir ran through the cast. It seemed the others shared Wanipii’s fear. Mascots who lost their popularity in the mortal world couldn’t return to the magical one; they just disappeared. It was a phenomenon they referred to as *monos*.

“It’s not just me, pii! We’re all going to disappear! What’re we gonna do, pii? Someday, I thought that I’d get to go home for a comfortable retirement, and now... Now it’s over... it’s all over, pii!”

“Shut your mouth, Wanipii.” Moffle said, sharply.

“Moffle! But—”

“How many years have you been here, fumo?”

“T-Twelve years, pii...”

“Then you’ve had your chance, fumo. So-ugly-it’s-cute was popular for a time, but did you ever work on improving your art? No, you got lazy, and let the park carry you instead of securing regular customers when you could. Don’t go losing your head about it now, fumo.”

“But, but...!”

“Now, calm down, fumo. I’ll hand out tissues with you. We’ve done a few bits on stage together, haven’t we? If we can recapture that energy, we’ll find some popularity with the local kids, and that’ll be more than enough to get by.” He shook Wanipii gently by the shoulders.

But Wanipii, his eyes pointing down, spat out his retort: “...You can only say that because you’re a first-stringer, pii.”

“What was that?” Moffle demanded.

“You can only say that because you’re Moffle, pii! Because you’re part of the top cast! You could easily get a job at some other amusement park if you wanted, pii!”

“Stop that right now, Wanipii. I—”

“Everybody knows it! You’re friends with Mackey, the big star of Urayasu Digimaland! You’re *good friends*, pii! He’d get you a job if you wanted one, pii!”

Mackey was a top-shelf mascot who worked at Digimaland. There was no one in the world who didn’t know his name. In mortal human terms, he’d be like an Oscar-winning Hollywood actor.

“I told you to lay off, fumo!” Biting back a few other things he wanted to say, Moffle grabbed Wanipii by the collar. Wanipii let out a choking sound. “You listen to me. He and I aren’t friends. We’re old acquaintances, that’s all. There’s no way I’ll ever ask him for help, fumo. The next time you insult me like that... I’ll pluck your scales off one by one! You’ll wish you’d never manifested in the

mortal realm, fumo!”

“I’ve been wishing that for a long time... ow! Hey, that hurts, pii! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, pii!”

“Both of you, stop it, ron!”

With Moffle threatening, and Wanipii crying and screaming, Macaron tore them apart from each other.

“Latifah-sama’s right there, ron! She’s the one who’s gonna suffer the most here! You know that, ron!”

Those words snapped Moffle back to his senses. Latifah stood stock still on the terrace, face turned down wordlessly.

Indeed, she would surely be the one hurt most by witnessing the cast fighting amongst itself. Moffle had known that, and yet, he had let his anger get the best of him in front of a large crowd of people.

“...I’m sorry, fumo.”

“Not at all...” Latifah gave him a sad smile, and signaled Isuzu to lower her rifle. She had probably been intending to shoot Moffle and Wanipii with her magic bullets before things came to blows.

“But there’s one thing I don’t get, mii...” the previously silent Tiramii said. “Why did you decide to tell us all of this today?”

Latifah’s shoulders stiffened at Tiramii’s question. “Ah, you see... the candidate I saw in my revelation officially refused us today.”

“Candidate... you mean, to be manager?”

“Yes. We entreated him as earnestly as we could, but...”

“It’s my fault,” Isuzu interrupted. “I’m sure you can imagine how it went. He was an ordinary mortal, and I acted like a member of the royal guard around him. I’m sorry.”

The cast was silent in the face of this apology.

“I was too overbearing, I suppose,” she continued. “He grew enraged with my manner, and left.”

Recognition immediately dawned on everyone, Moffle included. They knew what kind of person Isuzu was. But even if he was chosen by the revelation, the man was still just a mortal. Of course he wasn't going to go out of his way to save some run-down old theme park.

"We don't know if things might have worked out under him or not, but the man from the revelation was our last hope. Now that he's refused us, our options are exhausted. That was my judgment, and that's why we gathered you all here." Isuzu hung her head, and let out a small sigh. "That's why things have turned out this way. Everyone... I'm sorry."

It was unusual to see Isuzu acting so humble. But at the same time, the mascots were all thinking, *Asking some mortal for help was never going to solve things this late in the game*. Rumors had already gone around as to what kind of mortal had been chosen by the revelation.

He had just been some ordinary high school student. He had no particular business education; he hadn't even held a managerial position in his past part-time jobs.

"I recognize how hard this is for all of you..." Latifah continued for Isuzu. "But as long as we are living in the mortal realm, we cannot avoid being bound by financial concerns. I am truly sorry, everyone. I wish that I could apologize more..."

This time, nobody voiced any objections, and a heavy atmosphere of silence hung over the night-shrouded garden. Everyone just stood in place, limply, working to accept the sad truth before them. Some turned their eyes to the ground, some to heaven; some held back tears...

"Everyone, I am sorry..." Latifah repeated. "I am truly sorry."

And that was that. No matter how they lamented it, no matter how they cursed it, the park's fate would not change. They seemed to come to that conclusion all at once, and were just about to disperse— When suddenly, a new male voice spoke up. "It's a little early to be apologizing, don't you think?"

The speaker was Kanie Seiya, who was standing at the entrance to the garden.



The truth was that Seiya had been hesitating the whole way to the garden. *What can you possibly accomplish?* he'd kept telling himself. *This is insane. Stop being a fool, and go right home.*

But despite all that, he eventually made it to the garden, where he'd stood behind a tree, hearing everything that Latifah, Isuzu, and the large crowd of cast members had to say. He could have just left and forgotten that he'd heard anything. No one had even known he was there, after all.

And yet, Seiya came out. He came out in front of all of those heartbroken people. Even knowing that it would likely accomplish nothing more than taking that girl's absurdly heavy burden for himself, he stepped out.

He had no reason, save one, which was that he couldn't bear to watch her stand in front of that crowd, holding back tears, any longer. That was his one... his one and only reason.

This isn't like you at all, idiot, he thought to himself.

Nevertheless, Seiya raised his voice. "You people are pathetic! Before you go around moaning and feeling sorry for yourselves, at least do absolutely everything you can first!" It was very clear that what he said had struck a nerve.

There were a large variety of people there: some were covered in voluminous fur, some in scales; some had wings, and some had forbidding fangs. Some even looked entirely human, aside from the gaudy costumes they wore. And they all had their eyes fixed hard on Seiya.

"Kanie-kun?" Isuzu looked down at him from the terrace, eyes wide.

Latifah, standing silently in place, let out a small sigh. The expression that appeared on her face was one of gentle relief.

"Who's that? What's an ordinary mortal doing here, mii?" asked a Pomeranian-like mascot—*Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii*.

"Is he the one chosen by that revelation she mentioned? He left, didn't he? What's going on here, ron?" asked a sheep-like mascot—*Fairy of Music, Macaron*.

Seiya had read through the pamphlet, so he was more or less aware of the

names and appearances of the mascots who worked in the park.

These cast members really were from a magical realm, so he had also more or less accepted that the mascots weren't just people in suits. Given all the extraordinary things he'd experienced the last few days, it would feel a bit silly to keep insisting that "they're just costumes."

When Isuzu had said "there's no one inside," she had meant exactly that; there really wasn't anybody inside these mascots. They were real fairies, from a magical land. Of course, the details of these extraordinary phenomena didn't matter at the moment—he was here now, so he had to do what he had come to do.

As Seiya strode toward the terrace where Latifah and Isuzu were standing, someone blocked the way. It was the Fairy of Sweets, Moffle, the mascot with whom he'd fought before. His button eyes glared at Seiya with open suspicion. Somehow, it felt reminiscent of a sheriff in a Hollywood western.

"All right, boy," the mascot snarled. "You'd better tell me what you're here for, fumo."

So he can talk, too? When I met him before, all he'd said was "moffu"...

"Get out of my way," Seiya demanded. "I want to talk to her."

"She doesn't have anything to say to you. Turn around and go home, fumo."

"I can't do that. I've made up my mind to help, so that's what I'm going to do."

Moffle let out a snort, and narrowed his eyes threateningly. "We don't need some mortal's help, fumo. This problem is ours to solve."

"And what a brilliant job you've been doing of it," Seiya replied sarcastically.

"What did you say?"

Seiya cast his eyes theatrically across the crowd gathered in the garden. "Look at you, standing around, helpless! You can't attract customers, you can't make money, and now you're about to have your workplace snatched away. Yes, you've done a brilliant job of solving the problem yourselves, haven't you? And now you're going to pretend that you're not incompetent?! That you don't

need my help?! ...You know, the man from that Amagi Development place said something funny to me today. You want to hear it?" He cleared his throat.

"Anyone who comes to this park is an idiot!"

The air among the cast members stretched taut in an instant.

"Because they could be doing anything, yet they come to this lousy, boring, worthless amusement park! They spend their hard-earned money to bring themselves an absolutely miserable time! By God, it's a sound argument! I couldn't think of any way he was wrong!"

He could feel a silent anger filling the garden—a silent, but powerful, anger.

"And what are you doing about it? Nothing! You're just standing around, having yourselves a pity party! It all makes sense now! They'd really *have* to be idiots, to give money to people like you!"

"Why, you..." Moffle's voice trembled. "You shut your mouth, mortal. What would you know about this park, fumo?!"

"Everything!" Seiya raged. "I spent a day walking around here, and it's clear to me that you're all incompetent losers!"

"You bastard! I'll shut that smart mouth of—"

Moffle reached for him, but Latifah stopped him with a penetrating cry.

"Enough."

The round, plush paw halted in mid-strike. "Moffu..."

"Moffle-san," she lectured him, "it was I who invited Kanie Seiya-sama here. He has chosen to return to my garden, despite the offense that Isuzu-san has given him. Do you now seek to deepen our disgrace?"

"I... well..." Grudgingly, Moffle yielded the way. "Fine, fumo. ...Go on then, mortal."

Though stunned for a moment by Latifah's steel, Seiya passed by Moffle and headed for the stairs to the terrace. He could hear Macaron behind him, chiding Moffle in a whisper, "You're always stuffing your face in the station's street shops. What's with the high-and-mighty 'mortal' stuff now, ron?"

Sullenly, Moffle replied, "Shut up, fumo."

“Kanie-sama, I apologize on behalf of everyone here. Please forgive us,” Latifah said to Seiya when he reached the terrace.

“Oh, well...” he trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“I... I was sure that you would come.” There was a hint of warmth in her lovely voice.

“Ah, um... Well...” Seiya flapped his mouth uselessly, suddenly at a loss for words. Though usually capable of maintaining his pompous and superior air around anyone, he always seemed to lose his cool whenever he was near her.

“Kanie-kun. Can we assume from this that you’ve had a change of heart?” Isuzu asked.

“Well... I...” he started, then steeled himself again. *No, no. I came out here picking a fight. If I vacillate now, that all goes to waste...*

“I don’t believe I’ve introduced myself yet. I’m Kanie Seiya!” he proclaimed to the crowd gathered around the terrace. Then he cupped a hand to his ear, making a theatrical show of listening to them.

“Hmmm... I think I can hear what’s going through your minds,” he mocked. “The first thing I hear is... yes, you all hate me!”

He hadn’t used that “power” of his. That much was patently obvious, given the way most of the cast was glaring at him right now.

“Ah, but there’s more than just hate. I’m getting a few other things... ‘This impudent brat.’ ‘Who the hell does he think he is?’ ‘Are we just supposed to leave the park in his hands?’ ‘What difference can he make in just two weeks?’ ...I believe that just about covers it. No, wait, there’s one more thing; I’m making out a bit of ‘Our idol Latifah-sama chose this guy? Argh, I can’t stand it!’” Seiya smiled down at them defiantly.

Nobody laughed.

“Don’t like that, do you?” he jeered. “Hitting a nerve, am I? ...That’s good, because I’m not here to ask politely for anything. I’m here to rule you with an iron fist!” He slammed a fist of his own down upon the terrace railing. “Starting now, you’ll all do exactly as I say! One word of backtalk, and you’re gone! If this

lousy park is getting closed either way, then I'm free to run you ragged in the time we have left! But... I can also tell you one thing. In two weeks' time, this impudent brat you hate so much is going to make a miracle happen! That's right, I'm going to bring 100,000 people to this park!"

A brief silence hung over the garden, and then a commotion began. Most of it sounded like grumbling, criticism, and mockery, but there seemed to be a few, who, taken aback by his blustering words, had begun to show a hesitant interest.

Okay, come on. Any one of you. Say it to me, hurry up! Those words that I'm longing to hear, yes—

"Er... what makes you so sure that you can do it?"

There we go!

The one who had asked Seiya the question he'd been waiting to hear was a girl in a whimsical fairy tale dress. Seiya racked his memory, and remembered she was the Fairy of Water, Muse, who was part of the musical show.

"The revelation, my secret plan, and unwavering confidence," he told her. "Why, I could bring in 500,000 people if I had to! We'll need to get busy, though, so get ready to work your tails off!"

The commotion grew louder. The voices still seemed more critical of Seiya than otherwise, but a few words stood out from among the conversations: "The revelation..." "Maybe..." "Do you think..."

He'd gotten what he needed, for now. None of the rest of it mattered.

"I'll send out more detailed instructions later," he finished. "For now, report tomorrow for your regular shifts, and you'd better be on time! Got it?"

He cast a glance at Isuzu.

She had been staring at him, dumbstruck, but came back to her senses to shout, "Dismissed!"

Once the cast had filed out, Seiya, Isuzu, and Latifah were left alone in the garden. Moffle had left immediately with the other mascots—the tacit implication was that he had nothing more to say to Seiya.

“What are we going to do with Moffle?” Isuzu whispered.

“Is that rat always like that?” Seiya questioned her.

“No. Normally, he’s the one who keeps the cast in line, a bit like a senior NCO in your mortal militaries. He’s popular, too,” she added.

“I see,” Seiya frowned. “So he’s our hard-nosed drill sergeant, is that it?”

“That’s why I wanted to introduce you to him on Sunday,” Isuzu explained.

It was sounding like he’d need to solve the Moffle problem right away if he wanted to get anything done here. It was the “on-site leader” types who held the real power in organizations like these—the head nurse at a hospital, the site foreman at a construction site, the shift manager in a restaurant...

“Uncle... er, Moffle-san is a proud man,” Latifah said weakly. “Despite my revelation, he may still feel that it is wrong to ask a mortal for help.”

“Well, it’s understandable,” Seiya sympathized. “He was just humiliated by a total outsider, after all.”

“It’s almost like you realize you were doing it...” There seemed to be an extra layer of meaning in Isuzu’s words.

Latifah seemed to realize something too, and spoke up again, hesitantly. “Ah... Kanie-sama, the things you said were quite difficult for us to hear. Is it possible that...”

“Yeah,” he admitted, “it was a performance. I was trying to make them mad.”

“You were... trying to?” Latifah sounded bewildered.

Seiya rubbed the back of his head, feeling a little awkward. “I told them that their visitors were idiots to test them. If that line had gotten an apathetic response, it really would have been hopeless; they really would have been losers, and I would have walked right out, then. ...But they didn’t. They got really angry.”

“...Which means...?” Latifah prompted him.

“It means that I can work with them.”

“Ahh...”

“There are a lot of industries that are about bringing people joy, right? Singing, acting, writing, drawing comics, cooking... Professionals in those fields can stand being insulted—well, some can’t, but the ones who last a long time are the ones who can—but there’s one kind of insult that they absolutely can’t stand,” Seiya explained. “Do you know what it is?”

“Insulting... their patrons?” she guessed.

“Exactly. They can shrug off criticisms of their own shortcomings, but if you mock the people who love their work... that hits a nerve. They’ll get as angry as if you had mocked their family or friends. It’s a strange psychological trick.”

“.....”

“Anyway, if they get mad because I insult their visitors, that means they’re still serious about their jobs. And that means there might still be hope.”

“I see... How very educational,” Latifah said, a smile in her voice.

Does she really understand the situation? Seiya wondered.

“You *will* help us, then?” Isuzu asked, cautiously.

The realities of “A theme park run by mascots from a magical realm is facing financial troubles” and “I, a mere high school student, am going to be their manager” hadn’t fully sunk in yet, but— Well, after making such an imperious showing in front of that meeting of monsters, he couldn’t exactly say “No, I’m out” at this point.

“I will take the job,” he finally said. “But only for two weeks.”

“Two weeks?”

“I’m still a high school student,” he explained. “I need to focus on my studies.”

My video games, too. I’m not losing my precious gaming time to some stupid job. Finals are coming up, followed by spring break, and what kind of idiot spends their spring break working? I want to play video games from morning ’til night.

“Your studies, hmm?”

Seiya brushed off Isuzu’s skeptical gaze, then continued, “You just need to get

over this immediate hurdle, right? The park's destiny will be decided in two weeks. So whichever way it goes, my job ends there. Agreed?"

"...Yes," Latifah smiled. "Still, you have my deepest gratitude."

"...Don't thank me just yet." Seiya let out a deep sigh, then sank down into a nearby garden chair. For some reason, he was feeling extremely tired right now.

He wrestled briefly over whether or not to reveal his thoughts to Latifah and Isuzu. Then at last, he spoke. "I think I should be straight with you. ...I'm an ace student. I'm brilliant. I'm also extremely handsome and omni-talented."

"Did you just start bragging about yourself for no reason?" Isuzu's brow furrowed.

"Shut up and listen. ...So between that revelation of yours and that weird power you gave me, there's a certain sense of destiny hanging over my being here. It might seem like someone with talents like mine really could make a miracle happen, but—and I'm sorry to say this—getting 100,000 people in two weeks is all but impossible."

Seiya had been able to do a rough estimate of their attendance yesterday based on what he had seen; it was probably between 2,500 and 3,500. That was on Sunday, so it was probably the highest they could expect during this time of year, early in March. Weekdays, then, would be a fraction of that.

Assuming an average of 1,500 visitors per day, it would add up to a total of 21,000 over two weeks. They had a target of 100,000, but they were on track to get about 20,000 and change. No wonder the cast was so desperate.

"So?" Isuzu asked.

"I'll do all I can," he told them, "but it probably won't change how things turn out. I just want you to be ready for that."

"Then what you said to them before..."

"It was a lie, of course. I don't have any secret plan." A self-recriminatory smile came over Seiya's face.

"....."

"I just had to say that to them," he admitted, "because I need them to have

hope if I want them to give it everything they have.”

Isuzu turned her eyes to the floor despondently. But Latifah was gazing into the distance, still smiling. “I see... But Kanie-sama, I do still believe that you will make a miracle happen.”

Seiya was dumbfounded. She obviously was in full possession of her faculties, so... Did she somehow not understand the situation she was in?

“Oh?” he asked curiously. “Is that what that revelation of yours told you?”

“No,” Latifah told him. “My revelation merely told me which path to take. Nobody can know what will happen next.”

“Then how can you be so sure?” Seiya wanted to know.

“It is simply a feeling that I have. When you came in here earlier... I thought, ‘this is a man who will make a miracle happen.’”

Utter nonsense, he scoffed inwardly. *I’m not the kind of fool who hopes for miracles...* Feeling pure contempt for Latifah’s words, Seiya wanted to lay into her. But he didn’t. As to why he didn’t... not even he knew for sure.

Seiya got to work that very night. He decided not to bother going home; he just called his aunt Aisu to let her know he’d be staying out tonight, and that was that.

Isuzu prepared him an office on the fourth floor of an old administrative building, backstage. It was a bare-bones room with little more than a basic office desk, a folding chair, and several bookcases; it looked less like an office, and more like an interrogation room from a police drama.

“These are all the documents you asked for,” Isuzu said, as she dropped a thick stack of papers on top of his desk. Seiya, his nose already buried in the financial documents, answered, “Sure,” and nothing more.

“Is there anything else you need?” she asked.

“No.”

“If you’d like to take a nap—”

“There’s a sofa in the hallway, right? Leave me a blanket or something, too,” he said distractedly, and silently turned a page.

He wanted to get a solid grasp of the park’s circumstances—its financial situation, its facilities, its attractions, its cast performance—before tomorrow morning. Then, somehow, he had to come up with a plan.

The park attendance was more or less in line with what Seiya had expected. During this season—early March, when it was still too cold to properly be called spring—the average daily attendance was 1,400. He compared that data against the yearly average, and it seemed that no matter how hard they worked, the most they’d be able to get in two weeks was about 25,000.

And yet, they needed 100,000!

No ideas were coming to him. Surely, though, there had to be a way through somewhere... He felt like a man trapped in a collapsed tunnel, searching for a hole where fresh air was coming through.

Before Isuzu left the room, she spoke again. “Kanie-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“...Thank you.”

“Sure,” he responded absently. He was so absorbed in his reading that he didn’t even look at her face.

[Today’s park attendance: 1,332. (98,789 from goal) / 13 days left.]

A family restaurant along Fujio Road

Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii had come to the family restaurant, “Goonies,” in the city. Naturally, after a meeting like that, no one was in a mood to hit up the yakitori bar for drinks. Instead, they ate their crab cream croquettes, keema curry, and meat doria respectively, drank free refills of some pretty lousy coffee, and discussed their situation with gloomy expressions.

“...Hmm. There don’t seem to be a lot of good prospects, mii...” Tiramii whispered as he tapped and swiped on his smartphone. The little Pomeranian

mascot had been browsing fervently through “Plush Navi,” a job hunting site for mascots, for some time.

“You’re only searching in the city, right? Try the whole country, ron,” sheep mascot Macaron chimed in.

“But I want to stay in the city, mii... I don’t want to move too far away.”

“By which you mean, you don’t want to leave the woman whose email you just got, ron?”

“Certainly not! Okay, it’s true, mii...”

Tiramii’s womanizing tendencies were hardwired into him. It was the only reason Macaron could imagine for why he’d want to stay in the city.

“There are a lot of nice amusement parks out there if you look, ron. They rent old expo sites for next to nothing, slip a little under the table to the local governments, and basically end up rolling in dough.”

“Really? Wow, Macaron, you’re so smart about money, mii.”

“Just a sample of the sickness that permeates the Japanese economy, ron.”

“It does sound very cutthroat, mii!”

Macaron cast a glance at Moffle.

Moffle had barely said two words since the incident in the garden—since his argument with Kanie Seiya—and was now just staring silently out the window. He seemed sullen and listless. Even after receiving those croquettes, his favorite food, he had only eaten about half of the meal before shoving the plate away.

Macaron wanted to say something to him, but nothing clever was coming to mind. So, with no other choice, he resumed his vapid exchanges with Tiramii.

“...Anyway,” he advised Tiramii, “forget that woman already and seek out new frontiers.”

“Hmm... but I don’t want to lose Takami’s sweet booty, either...” Tiramii protested.

“When exactly did Takami’s ass become yours, ron?”

“I mean, in a future aspirations kind of way... I wanna puff with her someday,

mii...”

“Puff” was a Maple Land word that referred to a certain act. We won’t reveal the details here, but suffice it to say, it was nothing you’d do in polite company.

“...Oh! I’m also a Melody fan, mii... So I really want to stay in the area.”

By “Melody” he meant “Melody Shibazaki,” a soccer team based in a city next to Amagi. They’d gotten pretty far in the playoffs last year, so they were quite popular.

“That’s right, the opening game is soon, ron... Tiramii, if I got tickets, how much would you pay for them?”

“Macaron, you always do this, mii. You also sold AK47 tickets to Wanipii at a price that would make a scalper blush.”

“That’s a handling charge. Legitimate compensation for my efforts, ron.”

Just then, Moffle stood up. “...I’m going home, fumo.”

“Oh? But Moffle, are you okay, mii?”

“Am I okay? I don’t really know, fumo...” Moffle left his payment on the table, then left the family restaurant by himself.

3: There's a Facility That's Gone Unused For Decades

As the cast arrived for work the next morning—a Tuesday—they found a large announcement posted just inside the employee gate.

The announcement stated three things:

1. The park will be closed for the day.
2. Every cast member must spend the day cleaning and repairing their station.
3. Any station that doesn't show improvement by the end of the day will be closed indefinitely.

This was followed by a bit of supplementary information, which was then followed by the signatures of “Acting Manager” Kanie Seiya and Latifah Fleuranza, who had approved the notice.

It was addressed to “All Cast,” which meant it didn't just apply to the performers, but to everyone who worked at the park, including the people who ran the attractions, guides, shopkeepers, food vendors, security, and ticket sellers. It applied not only to those from the magical realms like Maple Land, but also to the mortal employees.

“What... What the fumo is this?!” Moffle, arriving for his shift as usual that morning, shouted as he saw the announcement. He marched back the way he came and stuck his head into the security station nearby.

“Okuro-san! Okuro-san! How could you let someone put up that prank sign?! You need to keep a better eye on things, fumo!” Moffle chastised Okuro, the morning shift security guard. He then noticed that Okuro was in the middle of tidying up his office with a broom.

“Oh, Moffle-san,” Okuro greeted him. “That's no prank sign. It was put up by the acting manager and Isuzu-san this morning.”

“Acting manager? That child, fumo?”

“Yep. Told me to clean up the security station, too... Well, I doubt he’d close down security either way, but I figured I’d do my job right, even so. It’s not as though I have anything better to do at the moment.”

“Where is he now, fumo?”

“He said he’d be touring the onstage area. Just a minute, hmm... ah, there he is,” Okuro said, using his security terminal to check where Seiya had been using his ID card. “He entered your House of Sweets three minutes ago.”

“Moffu...!” Muffle ran off, not even pausing to greet the familiar co-workers he passed on his way.

He leaped into his electric cart and took off down the underground passageway. It was extremely slow—so slow that speed-walking would be faster. He promptly jumped out and squeak-squeak-squeaked his way down the corridor. Once he reached the Sorcerer’s Hill area, he came back above ground, then entered Muffle’s House of Sweets, his usual station.

Kanie Seiya was standing in the entrance hall, running a finger along a wall garnished with trim that resembled fresh cream. Isuzu wasn’t with him; he was all by himself.

“What the fumo are you doing?!”

Hearing Muffle’s howl, Seiya turned around. He didn’t look at all surprised to see him. “Well, at least you weren’t late.”

“Boy, this is my workplace, fumo. I don’t appreciate an amateur putting his hands all over it.”

“...I didn’t notice it when I came on Sunday, but the ornamentation here is excellent,” Seiya commented. “It feels like the work of a real artisan... I thought it was urethane foam, but it’s not. I don’t know what this material is... It can’t really be hand-carved, can it?”

“You get away from there, fumo.” Before Muffle could charge in and grab him, Seiya stepped leisurely away from the wall. Then, with silent footsteps, he began walking a circuit around the entrance hall.

“I officially accepted the position of acting manager from Latifah yesterday,” he mused. “I’d say I can go anywhere in the park that I want, wouldn’t you?”

“So you came to pester me, is that it, fumo?”

“You really think I have time for that? I’m busy preparing a miracle.”

“Still flogging that line, I see, fumo.” Moffle fixed the young man with a glare, but Seiya just shrugged with a perfunctory smile. “But that’s not what I’m here for... it’s that announcement, fumo! You can’t just close the park without warning! In all of this park’s 29 years, we’ve never once done anything like that, fumo!”

“Oh, is that what this is about?” Seiya turned his face upward, squinting against the light streaming in through the skylight. “Our first priority is improving the park’s appearance. There’s litter everywhere, dust on everything... it looks awful. It’s an important job that’s going to take a whole day to do.”

“That’s all well and good,” Moffle argued, “but we can’t just close the park without warning, fumo! you say to the guests who came a long way to be here, assuming we’d be open?”

Seiya scowled. “Today’s Tuesday. We’re not going to get many people, anyway.”

“But we’ll still get some!” Moffle wailed. “Even if it’s just one family, leaving the gate open and welcoming the guests in is basic courtesy for any park!”

It was a given that any facility in the entertainment business must operate year-round outside of its pre-established closing days. This park had kept that promise for 29 years; to break it now would be to shatter all the trust that they had built up in that time.

The boy just didn’t know anything. There were quite a few businesses that only closed on Tuesday; beauticians, for instance, and a selection of bars. For children with parents in those professions, Tuesday was the only day they had for family fun.

“When your amusement park is this lousy,” Seiya commented, “I’m not sure that ‘basic courtesy’ applies...”

“How dare you!” Moffle snarled.

“But... I do see what you’re saying. I’ve been looking around this attraction of yours, and—” Seiya stopped walking abruptly. “It doesn’t appear to need any cleaning. It’s as if some strange, obsessive person has been cleaning it every day.”

“...?”

“In other words, rat... after the morning meeting, you’ll have a lot of free time. I’ll open the front plaza, and you can entertain our unlucky guests there.”

“What the... fumo?”

“Do some juggling, some dancing—whatever you like. Show the guests a good time, and send them home happy,” Seiya told him helpfully. “Then, we’ll at least be able to say that we opened for business. That’ll be your job for today.”

It was incomprehensible, Moffle thought. In that empty plaza just inside the gate, what was he supposed to do for the dozens of people—no doubt *unhappy* people—that they could expect for the day?

“You can do it, can’t you?” Seiya goaded him. “You’re a veteran, aren’t you?”

“Moffu. Well...”

“You can’t, then?”

“I... I can, fumo!” Moffle managed to blurt out at last.

“Good. I’ll send other cast members to help you as they finish their own cleaning. Anyway, I’ll leave you to that.”

Seiya walked away from Moffle’s Sweets House and the deflated, dumbfounded Moffle he’d left there. *He really is keeping it up well, though...* he thought. He hadn’t been lying when he said the house didn’t need cleaning.

It was a rather large attraction, yet it seemed like it was going through daily cleanings, with all the mechanical parts kept in good repair. Since the park had only the bare minimum of funds dedicated to maintenance, Moffle must have been keeping it up personally. According to the time card records, Moffle was logging overtime past midnight several times a week. He was probably staying

after closing to do the cleaning and repair work.

Given his behavior when they'd first met, Seiya had assumed Moffle was a slacker type, but it appeared he actually took his job quite seriously.

The trouble is his stubbornness, and his complete inability to just trust me... Well, I can't blame him. I don't trust that rat yet, either... If parks could trade cast the way baseball traded players, Moffle would be my first choice for the chopping block. Anyway, what will Moffle do with the order I gave him? Time to see what he's got...

(Now, the next item on the agenda...) Seiya stifled a yawn, and got on one of the park-use bikes he had stored backstage. He had scheduled a meeting with the department heads for 9:00 am, but there was a facility he wanted to check out in person first.

He had ridden to the east side of the backstage area and was looking over the employee guide map when he found himself addressed by an employee on her way to work.

"Ah... Kanie-san! Good morning!"

She hadn't checked in yet, so she was still wearing her street clothes: a down jacket and denim pants, with a fur hat pulled over her silver hair. She was a beautiful girl, and appeared to be a foreigner at a glance, but there was something indescribably Japanese about the way she bowed to him and smiled.

Who is she again? Seiya wondered. There was something familiar about her, but he couldn't place the face.

"Ah... excuse me! My name is Muse," she introduced herself. "I'm in the cast of 'Aquario'..."

"Ah." He remembered now. She was the 'fairy' who had asked him the question he needed during his grandstanding at the meeting last night. She had been wearing a revealing dress with large wings at the time, so he hadn't made the connection to her more mundane appearance until just now.

This Muse girl must be a resident of a magical realm, too— Seiya realized, even if, at the moment, she looked like a prep school student on her way to a mock exam.

“Just the person I wanted to see, then,” he said. “How do I get to this southern area?” He pointed to the location in question—a large space on the guide map that seemed nearly empty.

“Oh. The southern area is across the highway,” she told him after looking at the map. “You’d have to use the pedestrian bridge or the underground walkway... though we’re using the underground walkway for storage right now, so it might be hard to get through with a bike...”

“The pedestrian bridge, then? All right.” Seiya was about to ride off on his bike when Muse stopped him.

“Wait, I’ll show you the way!” she exclaimed. “It’s easy to get lost.”

“I’d appreciate that,” he told her, “but... weren’t you on your way to work?”

“Oh, I still have time. This way!”

He ended up letting Muse serve as his guide. Despite her mundane appearance, she seemed exceptionally articulate. “Aquario” was a musical, so perhaps it came naturally to her as a stage performer?

On the way there, he asked a question. “Been here long?”

“What?” she asked, not understanding his question.

“I mean, working here,” Seiya clarified.

“Oh... well, only about a year! Before that, I was a background dancer at Highlander Fujimi!”

Highlander Fujimi was an amusement park on the edge of Kanagawa. He’d heard it was more about over-the-top thrill rides than song and dance routines.

You know... he thought. For all this talk of magical lands, they still have workplace transfers and cast hierarchies. Not much of a fantasy, when you get right down to it.

“Um, Kanie-san. Could I ask you a question?” Muse asked.

“What is it?”

“Um... can you really bring in all those guests?” she asked doubtfully. “A hundred thousand... in just two weeks?”

“Of course I can,” Seiya replied immediately. It was a lie, of course, but he couldn’t let any doubt exist in her mind. “This is part of the groundwork I’m laying for it. It will take a lot of preparation, after all.”

“R-Really!” Muse’s tone was that of a person unable to fully believe, yet still happy to cling to invisible hope.

“So, what happened last night?” Seiya asked, redirecting their conversation to a safer subject. “Did you all get together to badmouth me afterwards?”

“Oh, of course not...” she replied immediately. “Well, it’s true that a lot of them aren’t happy with you, but we all know that we’re up against a wall. And a lot of them say they’re willing to give you a chance...”

“I see.”

This Muse girl seemed incapable of strategic omission, or really, of doing anything other than speaking her mind. He’d never need to use his magic to tell what she was thinking.

...As a matter of fact, Seiya hadn’t used his magic much at all since yesterday. He’d even deferred using it with Kurisu Takaya from Amagi Development; knowing he could only use it once per person meant he had to choose his timing carefully.

Ah, but even then—

Call it a part of his nature, or just his personal style... but it was a problem he had. Seiya was the type of person who, when playing an FPS, never used the most powerful weapons at his disposal. He held tight to his grenades and his rockets, and even with normal ammo, he tried to conserve as much as possible by sticking to careful shots to vital points. Automatic weapons were right out. As a result, he always beat the final boss with huge stockpiles of ammo left over and a vague feeling like he’d missed out, somehow.

—the way I use my magic feels a lot like that.

“This way.” Muse had been right about the pedestrian bridge being difficult to locate. He walked his bike up the wheelchair ramp, then crossed the highway, heading for the southern area.

Even with the vantage point of the pedestrian bridge, he still couldn't get a good grasp of what the southern area contained, thanks to the rampant, towering pine growth that covered the land like a shroud. Beyond the pines, he could just make out some kind of large, squat structure—a massive silhouette that seemed out of place with the untouched greenery of the surrounding hills.

“This southern area... it's barely used, I understand?”

“Yes, that's what I've heard,” Muse agreed. “They say it had a campground and an adventure play area, but they're closed now... so hardly anyone ever goes there.”

There was a paved path, but it had been left to the elements, with limp grass growing through the cracks here and there. Declarations of “This way to Excitement Campground!” and “Join us at Mischief Plaza!” remained barely readable on the rotting signs, which were covered in ivy. There was something profoundly lonely about seeing phrases like those in such a desolate place.

“I don't really know why it's been abandoned for so long, but...”

“Apparently they were going to use the land for an expansion,” Seiya said, remembering one of the documents Isuzu had handed him last night.

“Expansion?” Muse questioned.

“Once upon a time, this park did great business,” Seiya explained. “This was during the bubble economy in the 80s and early 90s, when they were swimming in money. Before the bubble popped and finances became strained, they had plans to build a second park in this southern area.”

“Oh? —Wait, do you mean, um...”

“.....?” Seiya waited for her to finish the question.

“Are you planning to build that second park now?!”

“Huh? In just two weeks?” Seiya stared at her, bewildered. Muse waved her hands hastily.

“S-Sorry. You said you were going to make a miracle happen, so I guess I thought it could be something that huge...”

“I don't know about you people, but I, for one, am not magic,” Seiya told her

dryly. “Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Muse hung her head. “You’re right... You’re a mortal, after all, Kanie-san. I’m very sorry.”

“.....? Anyway, the plans for a second park seem to have gone up in smoke after the bubble burst. They used what money they had left to create a rather pathetic little campground, and when that failed to catch on, they closed it. The southern area has been abandoned ever since.”

That was the extent of what Seiya knew. The documents he’d read last night had been rather limited in their information, which was why he had come here in person; to find out more about the southern area.

At the moment, he wasn’t seeing anything that might help him accomplish what he needed to. But—as they came to a clearing in the trees, they found themselves standing in front of an enormous structure.

At first, he thought it was a shipwrecked oil tanker that someone had left here for some reason. It had a towering, gently curved outer wall that extended far into the distance, and an intricate steel framework that was covered in ivy.

“What is...” Muse whispered.

“I think it’s a stadium,” Seiya responded, looking up at the large building. “That’s the one facility they completed in the lead-up to the second park project.”

“I’d always seen it from far away,” Muse commented. “I didn’t know it was a stadium. I didn’t even realize it was part of our park...”

“Apparently it barely saw any use, but it is complete. What I couldn’t figure out, from what I read, was why my predecessor would have built a stadium like this.”

“The theme of the second park was going to be sports,” said a new voice from behind him. It was Sento Isuzu, walking towards them, dressed in a bright red uniform.

After putting up the notice at the employee gate, she had said “I’m going to take a shower,” and wandered off. She must have just finished; her skin was

oddly lustrous.

“What, did you follow me here?”

“You may not know this, but...” Isuzu said as she passed them by, “...Muse is a very popular member of our cast. When a young man, fresh off receiving his new authority, leads her into a deserted region of the park... As the acting manager’s assistant, it is my duty to protect her from the threat of sexual harassment.”

“Stop making it sound so sleazy,” Seiya scoffed. “...And put that gun away! Stop trying to hurt me!”

Isuzu was pointing her usual musket at him. While Seiya shouted at her, Muse turned bright red, and began swinging her arms, floundering.

“Um, um, Isuzu-san! I-It’s not like that... I was just trying to be nice... I mean, I do think Kanie-san is handsome, I guess... but I was just showing him the way, um, and I was curious...”

“I appreciate you trying to cover for me, but you don’t need to say I’m handsome; everybody knows it.”

“Ahh?”

Seiya watched with a sidelong glance, and folded his arms as Muse deflated. “...Anyway, Isuzu, she’s just showing me around. Put that bizarre gun of yours away already.”

Isuzu obediently stored her musket. “It’s a shame... It would have been a good chance to try out ‘Paradise Lost.’”

“What is that?” he asked.

“It’s a bullet that makes you lose your reproductive functions forever,” she answered him.

“Don’t try that out on me!”

“Um... back to the subject...” Muse interrupted, timidly. “I believe you were telling us the concept for a second park...?”

That’s right; they were talking about how the stadium had come to be here.

“Yes, that’s right,” Seiya acknowledged. “You said it was going to have a ‘sports theme.’ What does that actually mean?”

“I don’t know any more than that,” Isuzu admitted. “All I know is that they were planning to go in a very different direction than the current park, and the stadium was built to be a sign of that.”

“Hmm...” Seiya looked up at the stadium again. It didn’t have an all-weather roof, but it was quite large—possibly one of the biggest in the Kanto region. Even as a remnant of the bubble economy, the extravagance of it all was enough to give him a headache.

“Why hasn’t it been used in over twenty years?”

“Apparently, Amagi City and Amagi Development wouldn’t give permission. They cited a variety of reasons... notices from the fire department, issues with the health services... It’s just like with the bus stop.”

“Ah.” He remembered his own confusion about the names of the stops when he’d taken the bus here with Isuzu on Sunday. The stop by the old entrance remained “Amagi Brilliant Park,” which made it easy to confuse a local love hotel for the park itself. At the time, Isuzu had told him that they had petitioned Amagi City to change it, but that they wouldn’t give permission.

It was probably this same roundabout resistance from the local government and stockholders that was keeping the stadium’s full potential from being realized.

“I will grant that the location is inconvenient,” Isuzu conceded. “The closest station is Amagi Station, and that’s ten minutes by bus... It would be difficult to carry in enough people to fill it.”

“...True,” Seiya agreed. “If I’d been in charge here at the time, I would have scrapped the stadium idea in the planning stage.”

“I heard that Amagi Development wanted to turn the southern area into a golf course or a residential complex,” said Isuzu. “So the building of a stadium was like an act of resistance against that.”

Seiya had acquired a more-or-less firm grasp on the intentions that various companies and the local government had for this park. It was a troublesome

situation.

Amagi Brilliant Park operated with funding from a number of entities. Latifah's allies consisted of a company called Maple Real Estate and a few other sponsors. The "enemy" that Isuzu had referred to was Amagi Development, which was in turn funded by Amagi City and Toto Railways.

Maple Real Estate itself was funded by the magical realm Maple Land. Getting your funding from a fantasy land seemed like a fairly dubious prospect, but the money from it was thoroughly laundered through foreign banks and companies, and by the time it reached Maple Real Estate, it was clean. At any rate, Maple Real Estate was a proxy for Maple Land, which meant it had an interest in keeping the park going.

Their enemy, Amagi Development, was a third sector organization run by humans from the mortal realm. It was a pragmatic management company, funded by investments from Toto Railways (a company with great power in western Tokyo) and other corporations, as well as the Amagi City government.

In a way, the history of Amagi Brilliant Park was a history of the rivalry between Maple Real Estate and Amagi Development. In the twenty years since the bubble burst and funding had become more scarce, the partisanship on both sides had only deepened.

Maple Real Estate, working hard to keep the park alive—Amagi Development, trying to kill it.

The situation they had found themselves in now felt like an extension of that, with Amagi Development exploiting that contract stipulation to try to deal the finishing blow.

"Was there something you wanted to do here?" Isuzu asked.

"No... I just wanted to see it, for reference."

"I see. It's almost time for the meeting. We should head back."

The meeting began at 9:00 sharp. It was attended by the heads of various departments, including: general affairs, accounting, maintenance, HR, food services, security, planning, and marketing, as well as the head of each park

area. There were about 25 members present in all, and they ran the gamut in terms of age.

Most of them were what Isuzu and Latifah referred to as “real cast”—people from the magical realms—a fact which held true even among behind-the-scenes staff who rarely interacted with the guests. Some looked like cute anthro animals, others like fairy tale creatures; some looked like they could have walked right out of an anime.

It seemed there were ordinary humans in some of the departments too, but it was a bizarre sight nonetheless.

Moffle was there, as well. He bore the title of “cast leader” for the Sorcerer’s Hill cast, which meant he was the coordinator for the cast that interacted with visitors in that area.

The department heads must have all heard the rumors about Seiya already. Although they regarded him with deep skepticism, they still listened quietly to what he had to say—until he declared that “starting tomorrow, everything will be completely free.” This was met with a burst of objections and outrage.

Making things completely free was the best way for them to increase their attendance. No cost for anything. Admission, attractions, food and drinks—all free.

“I’m against it, fumo.” Moffle declared.

“...And why is that?” Seiya inquired.

“We’re professionals, fumo. Under no circumstances can we entertain guests for free. It would bring the whole entertainment-for-compensation system crashing down, fumo.”

“Given the standard of entertainment *you* provide, I wouldn’t worry about it,” Seiya shot back sarcastically, referring to their interaction on Sunday.

Moffle let out a choking sound, but glared at Seiya anew. “...I was wrong to act that way and I apologize, fumo. But the quality of the entertainment doesn’t matter. Once you make it ‘free,’ customers will never accept ‘not free’ ever again, fumo.”

“Hmm, I see.” Seiya could grasp what Moffle was getting at.

“On top of that, what about our working capital, fumo? Even at this time of year, it costs about 3 million yen a day to keep the park running. Over the course of two weeks, that adds up to 42 million. Who’s going to pay for all of it, fumo?”

“We’re in the red as it is,” Seiya told him. “We can think about that later.”

Moffle was gobsmacked by his careless dismissal. “Think about *42 million*—”

“You’re already 400 million in debt if you shut down now,” Seiya scoffed.

“What’s a few more millions on top of that? Don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“If your ship goes down in a storm and you’re drowning, are you going to get picky about the plank keeping you afloat? Are you going to worry about who owns the plank?”

“Mgh...”

“This park is drowning,” Seiya announced flatly. “Our first priority is getting out of the water. We can worry about what shore we’ve washed up on later. Still...”

He could understand what Moffle was saying—that as a professional, he couldn’t tolerate the idea of working completely for free.

“But... yes, I see. If we can’t make it free, we’ll make it close to free; 30 yen for entry.”

A commotion ran through the group.

“...Why 30 yen, fumo?”

“Because next year will be the park’s 30th anniversary. It’s as good a reason as any, and it will get people talking.”

Another commotion ran through the group, marked by varieties of acceptance and skepticism.

“We need to get moving on advertising right away,” Seiya decided.

“Whoever’s in charge of that, stay here; everyone else can go back to their

posts. We're done here. Dismissed."

"I just can't stand that boy, fumo!" Moffle was in the underground passage backstage, huffing his indignation as he headed towards the plaza just inside the park's front gate. "30 yen! He's saying our art is only worth 30 yen, fumo! It's an insult! I won't stand for it, fumo!"

"Getting mad about it won't solve anything, mii." Tiramii responded. He was also heading to the front plaza, having met up with Moffle on the way.

Tiramii's attraction, Tiramii's Music Theater, was a theater set, which made it comparatively easy to clean. As a result, he'd also been ordered to entertain the guests denied entry to the park.

"Let's just make the most of it, mii. It'll be great for flirting with our fine lady guests. 'I'll make it cheap for you, baby. Thirty yen for life if you give me your email address.'"

"If you think any woman would fall for that, you're a greater fool than I thought, fumo."

"Huh? You can get some good puffs that way, you know? It's all about opportunity and persistence, mii. You try a line on ten women; one gives you her email address. You get ten email addresses; one agrees to meet you later. And since I'm so cute, my hit rate is even higher, mii!"

"I don't want to hear about your pick-up strategies, fumo. ...By the way, do you ever think about anything but puffing?"

Tiramii slicked back his fluffy head-fur and let out a long sigh. "That's the trouble, mii. I just can't imagine life without puffing, mii."

"...Enough. Anyway, back to my dislike of that child, fumo."

To charge 30 yen for park entry! Moffle wasn't insisting on entrance fees because he really wanted the money; he just didn't like having that price being put on his work. Ah, but then again, the first time he'd met Kanie Seiya, he *had* done the kind of work that no one would pay for... But that was because Sento Isuzu had contacted him in advance, and he'd wanted to test the boy's reactions. He wouldn't normally treat a customer like that.

Well, the boy did seem like a bright person, so he probably had some idea of what he'd been going for.

Even so, this treatment... It felt like pure revenge.

Even knowing that he was partly in the wrong, Moffle couldn't restrain his anger and annoyance.

"Moffle. That guy... ah, what was his name, mii?"

"Kanie Seiya, fumo."

"Yeah, Kanie-kun. I think he's got some pretty good ideas, myself. We're gonna get closed at this rate, mii, so we don't have the luxury of our pride. We're basically on our hands and knees, begging a woman for a pity-puff."

"Stop bringing everything back down to the gutter, fumo."

"But it's worked before, mii."

"You're kidding," Moffle scoffed.

"I'm not! Works for me, works for you. Puffin' good in the neighborhood. There's more to the *world* than you'd ever think, mii."

"Hmm... Did you just say 'world' in italics, fumo?"

"Sure did. I was going for *suggestive*, mii."

By now, they'd reached the receiving room that lay just under the front plaza. The number of the receiving room, EX-10, was written on the gray wall nearby.

"...Speaking of which, where's Macaron, mii?"

"I don't think he'll come today, fumo. His 'Flower Adventure' needs a lot of maintenance, and I think he's got a meeting with his lawyer in the evening, fumo."

"Ahh... Still fighting over child support?"

"He's failed to pay a few times since last year, fumo. Now his ex is suing him, I hear."

"Tough times for Macaron, mii."

Macaron was once-divorced, with a daughter. The daughter lived with his ex-

wife in Maple Land, and he hated the fact that he hardly ever saw her.

“Macaron’s always looking at pictures of his kid and going, ‘Next time I have time off, I’m going to see her,’ in this way serious voice, mii. It’s what we call a death flag, mii.”

“He’ll be fine, fumo.”

“How do you know, mii?”

“He calls her his kid, but she’s not a small child, fumo. Even if he meets her, it’ll just be a sad experience, with her saying ‘Dad, you’re way gross’ and keeping him at arm’s length. Which means it’s not a death flag, fumo.”

“So tragic, mii.”

They passed through the receiving area and came above ground backstage. They were now at the employee door that led to the front plaza, Entrance Square.

“We’re about to go onstage, fumo. Drop the mortal talk.”

“Roger that.”

They paused for a moment and got into character.

“Moffu.”

“Mii.”

Each whispered his own standard line, then they walked “onstage”—in other words, into the area where the guests would be. Small talk was forbidden from here on out.

It was ten minutes to opening time, but there were already a small handful of guests hanging around in Entrance Square. There were three or four sets of families and couples. They all looked confused and angry in light of the “Closed Today” sign on the gate.

“Moffu...”

Customers, I am terribly sorry.

You have been put in an unenviable position as the result of one young man’s arbitrary decision. As a small token of our apology, in lieu of our various

attractions, we hope you will enjoy a personal audience with us, the park's star cast.

Shall we begin with a bit of simple juggling, perhaps? Watch as one ball becomes two, then two become four, and they all dance together in the air.

Now, let's—

"Shaddap!"

"Moffu!"

A young child slammed him in the side with a flying kick. Moffle felt a sharp pain in his hip, then fell over, spilling his juggling balls across the flagstones.

"M-Moffu..."

Few people knew how much a serious blow from a young child could hurt. It was an experience limited mainly to parents, people with much younger siblings and relatives, and nursery school workers.

"I wanted to go to Digimaland! But I was good! I said okay to AmaBri! Now it's closed! This sucks! You're a stupid rat! I want Mackey!"

"Guh..." The child continued to pepper Moffle with kicks as he let loose his string of verbal abuse.

This hurts. This really hurts. This truly hurts. Enough, brat. Mackey, you say? I could kill you for that. He's not even that great a mascot. He's just money-hungry. Where the hell are your parents, anyway? Why won't they stop this?

"Banja-kun! Banja-kun! Stop it! Stop it right now!" A woman in her mid-twenties, hair lightened with bleach, ran up to them. She was probably the child's mother.

"M-Moffu..."

"But Mama..." the child protested.

"You don't know where that costume has been!" the woman scolded. *"It must be covered in germs! Don't touch it, you hear me?"*

"Fine...I won't."

The mother dragged her child off of Moffle, then turned to address him

where he was laid out on the ground. “My Banja-kun better not catch anything from you, you hear? I’ll drop a lawsuit so fast it’ll make your head spin. You’d better get your legal team ready!”

“Moffu...”

Yes, dear customer. I’m so sorry for the distress I’ve caused you. We’ve been inconsiderate. Your child’s anger is well-deserved. I feel my own incompetence very keenly, and I will take this as a lesson to improve in the future.

...Ah, and his name is Banja-sama, is it? What a very original, very fine name! Any difficulties it brings your child in life will but help to shape him into a man. I, the humble Moffle, stand before you in awe.

Your concern that the precious child might catch terrible germs from my unworthy self is most appropriate. Yes, your anger is nothing if not justified. I beg your deepest pardon.

Kick me as you like. Abuse me as you like.

By all means, strike me to your heart’s content.

“...Is that what you thought I’d say, fumo?! You stupid bitch?!” As the woman got up in his face, he gave her a hard shove.

“Ouch! ...Hey, what’s wrong with this thing?” the woman wailed. “It’s acting crazy! And it’s talking now, too!”

“Moffu...”

Things immediately spun out of control. Within five seconds of hearing his wife’s shouting, the husband came running up. He was young too, with tightly curled hair. He was wearing a gold necklace and smoked sunglasses, with a selection of rings that clinked on his fingers. Basically, he was a quintessential delinquent.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on here?” he demanded.

“Did you see that, Tak-kun? He shoved me!” The woman’s victimized tone only annoyed Moffle more. “He upset Banja-kun, and when I tried to complain, he just shoved me! Isn’t it awful? Can you even stand it?!”

Seeming to accept the woman’s side without question, the man—‘Tak-kun,’

apparently—glared hard at Moffle. “Oh, yeah? You got some nerve, you little rat!”

“That’s right!” she sniffled. “They can’t just shove customers, right?”

“You bet they can’t. Ain’t that right?!” The husband had gone right into beatdown mode, cracking each of his knuckles in turn before beckoning with his fingertips. “Hey, rat! Get your ass over here! First, I want that costume off! You wanna respect the customers, you better look ’em in the eye! Yeah?!”

Moffle closed his eyes, fists trembling. “Customer. Yes, you are my customer. And as the saying goes, ‘the customer is God,’ fumo...”

“Yeah, so?” the husband snarled, “I told you to get your ass over here!”

“Yes, the customer is God, fumo. But... is it not man’s nature to fight back against tyrannical gods? Like Captain Kratos of Sparta, in the days of the ancient Greeks—though mortal, he took up divine arms and destroyed the God of War, Ares...”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

“I’m saying that there are some things that cannot be tolerated, even if the customer is God. I’m rebelling against the gods, fumo. Strike me down with lightning if you wish.”

“Oh, yeah? You need me to beat the point into you, ’zat it? Fine, just stay where you are! One move and you’re dead!” “Tak-kun” pulled back his fist and charged straight at Moffle.

“Moffle! Don’t do it, mii!” Tiramii ran up, but was unable to stop him in time—Moffle’s right hook cracked the gentleman in the jaw.

Actually, “cracked” wouldn’t be quite accurate. It was a meticulous strike designed to graze just the tip of the man’s jaw. It applied short, sharp torque to his skull, which rattled his brain inside his cranium.

Tak-kun collapsed like a puppet with strings cut. “Uhhh...” he groaned.

“I would never fall to scum like you, fumo,” Moffle sneered at his opponent, who was now immobilized and barely conscious. “Now, you lie there and watch, helpless, as I exact a gruesome penance from your wife and child, fumo.”

The mother, who had fallen on her backside in terror, watched as he picked up one of the rubber balls on the ground. Regardless of what he could actually do with the ball, he still looked like an interrogator picking up an implement of torture.

“Ah... ahh...” the man moaned helplessly.

“Your cries won’t save you, fumo. You’re about to see what happens when you make an enemy of Amagi Brilliant Park.”

The man shrieked.

“Now... get ready, fumo. ‘Customer!’” Moffle held the rubber ball high over his head.

“Give it a rest, rat.” Kanie Seiya appeared out of nowhere, and sent Moffle flying with a kick.

He didn’t think the mascot was this stupid, but apparently he was the type to fly off the handle when he was angry. *Honestly, it’s a good thing I came to watch just in case...*

Seiya extended a courteous apology to the outraged family. Naturally, they refused it, and started shouting about suing them and shaming them on social media.

He had no recourse but to have Isuzu use her magical gun—that “Forgotten Realm” bullet she’d mentioned before. The family immediately forgot the argument and walked away from the park. They were still grumbling, but showed no sign of remembering exactly what had happened to them.

It seemed a few other guests had witnessed the incident, but they’d all disappeared during the commotion. All Seiya could do was pray that the rumors didn’t spread far.

“So you treat your ordinary guests this way too?!” After everything was settled, they withdrew backstage, where Seiya gave Moffle a dressing down.

“..... That was an exceptionally rare case, fumo.”

“‘Exceptionally rare?’ Does that mean it’s happened before?”

“It has,” Isuzu responded bluntly.

Tiramii, who had come backstage with them, chimed in: “Only once a year, if that. He tolerates the vast majority of the guests’ outrage, so please forgive him, mii.”

“For heaven’s sake...” Seiya’s head hurt.

An amusement park where the mascots sometimes hit customers? How on earth had they stayed in business this long? Why hadn’t the police gotten involved?

“The only reason this isn’t a catastrophe is because of Sento’s magical gun. Forget about picking up attendance; we’d have been dead on the spot!”

“Was I just supposed to let him hit me, then? Even mascots have their pride, fumo!”

“You can take that pride and shove it! Especially if you call yourself a professional!”

Surprisingly, Moffle didn’t get any angrier. Instead, his expression was a mix of emotions. It seemed pitying, sad... and also disgusted. It was impressive that he could convey all that with just the button eyes and moffley mouth on that plushy face of his.

“What?” Seiya demanded. “Am I wrong in any way?”

“No, you’re not wrong, fumo,” Moffle said, then sighed. “If I’m going to call myself a pro, I have to be professional with the customers, no matter what they say to me. That’s fundamental, fumo. It’s the iron law of customer service. ...Now of course, you’re not wrong. But...”

“?”

“The one saying those things should be more... ah, no, never mind, fumo.” Moffle fell silent, as if stifling himself.

Seiya felt an urge to use his magic—the power to peer into a person’s mind, but only once. But it would be a waste to use that one-time-only chance on something like this. He should save it for a more critical situation; something that would give him real blackmail material on this rat, to really make use of

him...

“...Well, anyway. I acted badly, fumo. You can fire me now, if you’d like.” Moffle said, seeming to regain a bit of his fire.

That bastard. He was well aware of the position he was in—as the park’s headliner and a cast coordinator, he knew that if Seiya fired him now, it would just make the park harder to manage. This mascot was one hell of a tough customer.

Isuzu and Tiramii were both watching. Well, then. How to respond?

Seiya ran a few calculations in his mind: the mission he’d accepted; his priorities in accomplishing it; what he’d need to execute his plans; the risk-cost assessment of winning over this stupid rat.

Calculation complete.

“I’ll let it go once,” he said in a hushed voice. “The next time you make trouble, you’re out. Watch yourself.”

Moffle and Tiramii went back onstage and resumed entertainment of their sporadic visitors; they juggled, and they danced. In a total reversal from his earlier belligerence, Moffle was quite conscientious with the guests. Some of the children even left quite happy.

Seiya watched them from afar for a while. Then, Isuzu addressed him. “I thought you were going to fire him.”

“Why?”

“It’s your first day here,” she observed. “You won’t be setting much of an example if you allow behavior like that.”

“The guy’s our cleanup hitter,” he admitted. “There are some things I need him to do before I fire him. Besides, thanks to you, he hasn’t done any concrete harm.”

Isuzu just let out a sigh. “Those ‘Forgotten Realm’ bullets are extremely precious. Each one takes a year to make, and I only have one left.”

“...Really.”

“You should treat the use of my magic bullets with the gravity of selling off family heirlooms.”

“Guh...” He couldn’t believe she had used something so valuable so willingly for him.

But wait. “Incidentally... Sento. How much do the bullets you wanted to test on me this morning cost?”

“The bullets that remove reproductive function? ...I bought those a long time ago at a Maple Land 100 yen shop. With tax, they were 105 yen apiece.”

What on Earth... “That’s outrageous.”

“I agree that they seemed excessively cheap. That’s why I wanted to test them...”

“Ah, forget it,” he sighed. “...Anyway, you really saved us. Thank you.”

“Not at all. I intend to do whatever is required of me.”

“I see. Then I’d like to request a little more of your service—”

They were standing before the gates of Maple Castle, at the center of the park, when Isuzu spoke up. “I didn’t think you meant this kind of service...”

It was quite a revealing swimsuit to be wearing in such cold weather. She was a very curvy girl, well-endowed in the chest and backside, but her expression was sullen and her lips had started turning blue.

“Um, Kanie-san. As a member of the cast, I don’t know if I should be wearing this...” Muse spoke up. She was standing bolt upright next to Isuzu, also in a swimsuit, her shapely, slender legs fidgeting.

“Kanie-sama... are you certain you want me to be in the pictures?” Latifah asked. She was standing, partly supported by Isuzu—and also in a swimsuit, naturally. Her body was perilously thin, but well-proportioned, with lovely porcelain skin.

Seiya held up his smartphone camera and started giving out instructions.

“Take one step back. No, that’s too far back... Yes, there. Perfect. Stay right

where you are, Princess. Okay, now hold up the poster.”

Latifah tentatively held up her poster. It read, “Our 30th Anniversary is Coming Up!” The other two held up posters reading, “Everything just 30 yen!” and “It’s a steal!”

“Um, um...” Muse stuttered shyly. “Will these pictures really make for good publicity?”

“It’s a vulgar idea, if you ask me,” Isuzu muttered.

“...Achoo!” Latifah sneezed.

Three matchless beauties in revealing, provocative swimsuits... Seiya thought. Vulgar or not, it’ll definitely draw the eye. I’m not exactly a fan of this kind of tactic myself, but—

“We need something eye-catching, that’s all,” he said out loud. “It doesn’t matter what it is.”

The shutter snapped. The lighting was poor, but he could fix that with photo editing software. He continued taking pictures, regardless.

“Come on, smile,” he encouraged them. “Let’s see those pearly whites. Don’t look like a slave on the block in ancient Rome.”

“But that’s exactly how I feel...” Muse complained.

“Sento. You’re the only one not smiling,” Seiya observed. “You’re still scowling.”

“I’m trying to smile...” Isuzu replied.

The cast, still cleaning their stations, watched the scene from afar. Some seemed delighted by the unexpected feast for the eyes, while quite a few others shot glares of disapproval.

There’s no way in hell I’m going to let that stop me, though... Seiya thought to himself.

“Okay,” he said. “Now, let’s make a video.” Latifah and Muse had shot glittering smiles, but right to the end, Isuzu remained dour. After taking as many photos as he could get, Seiya switched his smartphone to recording mode. “Say

it all together, now, loud and clear... One, two..."

"Amagi Brilliant Park, only 30 yen..." they said, weakly and not at all in sync.

"Loud and clear, I said!" Seiya scolded them. "One more time! One, two..."

"Amagi Brilliant Park!" the girls chimed together. "Only 30 yen!"

Seiya had felt a bit guilty about forcing the sickly princess to join them, but he didn't have time to worry about appearances. He finished up the filming, then headed straight back to his office.

He did some retouching on a rather old PC, which had been sent to him by General Affairs. He slapped on a random font, then laid out the details of the 30 yen campaign. All in all, it took him ten minutes. He called in the head of the PR department, sent the data to his address, and then gave him a detailed set of instructions.

Incidentally, the head of PR was a strange creature from one of those magical realms. He looked like a three-heads-tall triceratops wearing stylish glasses. His name was Tricen—a bit on the nose as names went, but it appeared to be his real one.

"Oh-ho... this is good. This is really, really quite good," Tricen purred as he checked the raw video footage. "Normally, amateur videos like these are a dime a dozen, so they don't make much of an impact, but this one's different."

"Really? It was purely a move of desperation on my part..." Seiya admitted.

"Absolutely," Tricen reassured him. "The three of them have excellent assets—they're cuter than most idol singers, and their reticence makes them more compelling. It lacks any sense of calculation, which is the heart of moe. I, the humble Tricen, must hunch over in appreciation." They were atrocious things to say with such ease and sincerity.

"...Hey," Seiya objected indignantly.

"Forgive me," Tricen said apologetically. "...Anyway, I think these assets will cause a stir in the mascot industry."

"You think?"

“Yes. Isuzu-san and Muse-san are both superior specimens, to be sure, but Latifah-sama is part of the Maple Land royal family. To see Her Highness looking... so frail and underdeveloped... ohh, the poignancy! But that poignancy is also attractive. Might I take a few moments in the bathroom?”

“Absolutely not,” Seiya said firmly. Was there a single decent person in this park?

“The only trouble,” Tricen observed, “is that it won’t appeal to the housewives at all. It may actually backfire with them...”

“I have other things in mind for them.”

“I see. But I must say... I am surprised that Moffle-san gave permission for Latifah-sama to appear like this.”

“...?” What a strange thing to say, Seiya thought. Why would I need that rat’s permission?

“Oh. You didn’t know? Lord Moffle is Latifah-sama’s—” The sound of a door bursting open interrupted Tricen’s words.

“Kanie Seiyaaaa!” The door, kicked off its hinges, smashed into the far wall before toppling end-over-end to the floor. Moffle stomped his way in, radiating violence.

“What is it, rat?” Seiya asked.

“You’ll die for this fumooo!” Moffle charged at Seiya, and lashed out with a paw. Seiya just barely managed to dodge, weaving deftly to put some space between them.

“What the hell?!” he demanded.

“Shut up! How dare you use Latifah like some little tramp?! Swimsuits? Advertising?! Unforgivable, fumo!” Moffle pressured him further, dishing out paw-strikes right and left. “You know that Latifah is sick! Yet you sent her out in the cold air, forced her to debase herself in that sexualized outfit... It will not stand, fumo!”

“Forced her?” Seiya objected incredulously, “I told her she didn’t have to do it!”

“You knew she wouldn’t refuse, fumo! She’s... she’s... she’s a good girl, fumo! You took advantage of her!” Moffle vaulted forward with another powerful punch. Seiya dodged, leaving the mascot to break his desk in two. Tricen ran around, trying to avoid the flying splinters.

“Fumomomomomomo!” Another thousand paw-punches rained down on Seiya.

“Gnaaaaaaaah!” Seiya rose to the challenge, deflecting each of them in turn.

So fast! So powerful! He could feel Moffle’s anger and sorrow through his palms...

“Ngh...” There was honesty in this power. Did he owe it to Moffle, as a man, to bear the brunt of his heart’s primal scream? Was that his duty as acting manager? *Like hell it is!*

“You damned rat!” He let an attack slip by, then lashed out with a roundhouse kick. Fists in a guard position, Moffle bent over to dodge, and simultaneously let out a swift one-two. Pa-pow! Seiya blocked the punches, gained some distance, then worked to catch his breath. *Looks like I can’t let him get in too close*, he realized.

Hey, is that...! Those rhythmical movements of his body. That guard position, with his short arms pulled back, like he was chewing on his fists. Yes, it was...

“Peek-A-Boo style?!” Seiya demanded incredulously. The ultimate close-range fighting style—Mike Tyson’s specialty, which had laid out countless opponents. It was considered something of an anachronism under boxing’s current focus on safety, but it could still imbue a strong, short fighter with devastatingly explosive power. With Moffle’s height and his god-given strength, it could unleash amazing force.

Moffle’s expression changed, as if to say, *Oh? You know it?* “That’s right,” he boasted. “I was taught by the famous Cus D’Amato, Tyson’s own trainer. I was the last of his students, fumo.”

Yeah, I doubt that, Seiya thought skeptically. *And if it’s true, how the hell old does that make you?*

“I’d sworn that I’d never use the style on an amateur. But for you, Kanie

Seiya... For the sake of your execution, I will break that seal.” Moffle’s rush was like the charge of a reinforced tank. “You’ll feel the gravity of your crime... for making Latifah look sexy, fumo!”

This wasn’t good, Seiya realized. If the office was a ring, then he’d been driven into the corner. At this rate, he’d have nowhere to run to. He’d just end up pummeled! “Ngh...” Wasn’t there anywhere he could go? No opening to the left, no opening to the right... Yet there was one way. Yes, it was... up!

“Ngaaaaaagh!” Seiya attempted a superhuman jump into the air. Moffle clicked his tongue and attempted to intercept. Then, Sento Isuzu fired “pain like stubbing your little toe on the dresser” bullets into both of them.

“That’s quite enough,” Isuzu said. She held her musket at the ready, looking down at the two of them writhing on the ground. She was already in her park uniform; she must have gotten changed, and then run all the way here.

“Mof... fu...!”

“Th-That... hurts...!”

“Enough of this pointless fighting,” Isuzu told them firmly. “...Now, Lord Moffle. The princess agreed to modeling with full understanding of the situation.”

“Moffu. But... but...!” Tears of chagrin streamed down Moffle’s cheeks.

“The princess showed no signs of distress,” she continued. “Crimson from embarrassment, she declared ‘Forsooth, that such apparel might please the rougher sex... ’tis abashment unrival’d!’”

“Grr...”

“Why did you put it in literary style?” Seiya wanted to know. *And doesn’t that amount to her saying, “It’s embarrassing that men would find this outfit pleasing?”*

Isuzu ignored him, and went on, “One of the vassals who heard it said... ‘Your words reach their ears, milady, and they squeeeth.’” *In other words, the princess’s words made the men squee.*

“Seriously, why the literary style?” Seiya demanded. “...And can you really

conjugate 'squee' that way?"

"At any rate, Latifah-sama gave ready consent to the matter," Isuzu concluded. "Therefore, Lord Moffle, I cannot agree that your protest is appropriate."

"Moffu... But you should avoid taking Latifah-sama out of the rooftop garden," he said with dismay. "You know that's the barrier, fumo."

"She should be safe as long as I'm with her," said Isuzu.

"Fine, fumo," Moffle reluctantly agreed.

"Kanie-kun. Moffle caused another problem. Are you going to fire him?" she asked.

"...No. He kept it backstage, so it doesn't count." If he'd tried something like this in front of the guests, Seiya would have fired him on the spot. Fortunately, they were in his office, behind closed doors. As infuriating as it might be, he couldn't fire someone based on personal emotion.

"Understood," she affirmed. "Fine, then. Return to work at once, Moffle."

Work was over for the day.

The guests who were shown into the plaza were counted as entrants, so attendance was along the lines of what he'd expected: 1,491.

PR manager Tricen worked hard, and got the Amagi Brilliant Park 30 yen promotion uploaded to the internet around dinnertime. The sexy advertising video that had so enraged Moffle was now on both the park's homepage, and a popular video site.

After returning home exhausted around midnight, Seiya checked the hits on the promo video. Tricen was right when he said that the girls had considerable appeal; it was a shameless and transparent ploy, but one that would surely attract attention.

Never underestimate sex appeal... he thought. Attracting attention was their first priority. They had to do whatever it took to get there. However... Contrary to his hopes, the announcement video's hits were a mere 83.

It had been four hours since he had uploaded the promotion. Even if it was just people associated with the park checking it out of curiosity, he would have wanted it to be a little higher. Perhaps he'd been naive after all.

[Today's park attendance: 1,491. (97,298 from goal) / 12 days left.]

Seiya took the next day off from school as well. It was the first day of the 30 yen campaign; he just couldn't bring himself to sit in class and wait for reports. He commuted to the park early in the morning to see how things were going onstage, micromanage, and hold conferences.

Attendance was even lower than it had been the day before. It was a weekday; a Wednesday. It was natural that there wouldn't be many people there. Besides, hardly anybody knew about the 30 yen campaign yet. Seiya planned to keep promoting during the week, with newspaper inserts and the like, but he had his doubts about how much attention that would garner.

In the gaps between various tasks and meetings, he continued checking the Internet. Just before closing time, there were 163 hits on the announcement video. Almost no increase at all.

He was passing through the cast entrance on the way home, cradling his head in disappointment, when the security officer addressed him. "Heading home, Kanie-san?"

"Yeah..."

"Today was a strange day, wasn't it?" the security guard observed.

"...?"

"Well... As you know, there are a number of surveillance cameras onstage," he confided. "They pick up audio, too. I watch them in my spare time, and..."

"And?" Seiya asked back. The security guard smiled awkwardly, as if unsure about exactly what to say.

"I heard a great deal of laughter, from both the cast and the guests..."

Seiya was utterly exhausted. He was exhausted, so he didn't pay any heed to the security guard's words. Their attendance numbers were hopeless.

Laughter? he thought, *What good is that supposed to do us?*

He returned home and checked their hits again: 218. It was impossible. How could he get 100,000 people to the park when only 200 had seen his video?

[Today's park attendance: 1,448. (95,850 from goal) / 11 days left.]

Suzuran Shopping Street, Amagi Station North Entrance

They were back at "Savage," the yakitori bar near Amagi Station.

"I came because you said you were having a kickoff celebration..." Isuzu said. "Why is it just the four of us here?" She was sitting around the table in the tatami mat room with Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii.

"I invited others, but they didn't come, fumo..." Moffle said.

"Moffle's surprisingly unpopular, ron," Macaron said.

"Social drinking after work isn't as trendy as it once was, mii. Especially since it doesn't come with overtime pay," Tiramii said.

"Well, it's all right, fumo. What matters is that work's over for the day. Cheers..."

Listless and haphazard, the four of them brought their mugs together. Isuzu's glass inevitably hit that of Moffle, who was next to her, and that of Tiramii, who was right in front of her. But Macaron was across the table diagonally, so she was awkwardly unable to make contact. It wasn't worth calling for another toast over, but she still felt a little rude about withdrawing her glass.

"....." For the first time, Isuzu had experienced the awkwardness of failing to toast with someone she wasn't terribly close to.

The three of them drained their mugs of beer and Hoppy, then let out a deep sigh. Isuzu had oolong tea, so she just drank enough to match the mood.

"...So, Macaron? How did things go with the lawyer, mii?"

"They're willing to give me some leeway on my daughter's child support

payments. But she sends her to a private school, so there's a lot of expenses, ron..." Macaron whispered limply.

Moffle glared at him from the corner of his eye. "I told you not to get involved with that woman, fumo. Former idols are always extravagant spenders. Nothing good was ever going to come out of it, fumo."

"You've told me over and over, ron..." There was pain in Macaron's voice. "But when we first got married, I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world, ron..."

"Marriage is the end of life, fumo." Moffle declared with great authority.

Though as far as Isuzu knew, Moffle had never been married... Ahh, of course. It must be some kind of aphorism.

"Women like her know how to hide their machinations," Moffle counseled. "Men's inability to catch on is the sad fate of our race, fumo."

"I agree, mii. Here's some words of wisdom from ol' Tiramii... 'When you see a pretty woman, assume she's a slut.' It'll save you lots of time, mii. Y'know?"

Tiramii's thoughtless words roused Macaron to anger. "Are you calling my ex-wife a slut, ron?!"

"Well she is, mii. She already got herself a new man, didn't she?"

"Well... I have heard that, but..." Macaron trailed off.

"And she wasn't a virgin when you got married, mii. Moffle said you stressed out about that, for a while."

"I-It's true that I was shocked when she said she'd had some wild years, but... Ngh... stop it. Just stop it, ron!" Macaron clutched his head in agony. Beside him, Moffle blew out a plume of cigarette smoke.

"Well... you know. Her past partners aren't a big deal, fumo. Rolling with life's punches is part of a man's training, fumo."

"That's a nice turn of phrase, mii."

"You'll go through a lot of experiences in life, fumo. Some day you might look back on this and think 'that was rough, but it wasn't all bad,' fumo."

“The lectures aren’t making me feel any better, ron!”



What would the guests think if they heard this depressing conversation? Isuzu cleared her throat loudly, as if to tell them to knock it off. “So, is this really supposed to be a kickoff celebration?” she asked. “I thought we’d be talking about something enlivening. I’m disappointed.”

The three of them looked at her disdainfully.

“Don’t be so insensitive, fumo.”

“It’s just small talk building up to the main discussion, ron.”

“You should appreciate our attempts to break the ice, mii.”

The three spoke in turn.

“And anyway, there’s not much to talk about, mii. I guess if anything, I’d want to hear more about him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, ron.”

“Him?” Isuzu questioned.

“Kanie Seiya, ron.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Giggling, Tiramii imitated Seiya’s usual expression. All he did was turn his mouth into a sullen scowl, though, so he didn’t look much like him at all. “Give it to us straight, mii! Isuzu-chan, are you into him?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking,” she replied pointedly.

“You spend more time with him than anyone in the park, mii. We know you’ve been especially protective of him. It’s intriguing, mii.”

“Well... it’s my job,” she said defensively. “There’s nothing suspect about me supporting him.”

The three of them narrowed their eyes at her with deep curiosity.

“Still, we want to know if you’re into him or not, mii.”

“Just be honest, ron.”

“Let it all out. You’ll feel better, fumo.”

How can they be so insensitive? she wondered. No matter how I answer, they’ll misinterpret it. Then, if it got back to him, it could result in a terrible

misunderstanding. She couldn't have that. It would cause trouble in several respects.

"...I'm leaving," she announced abruptly.

As Isuzu stood up, the three immediately burst into whispers.

"Oh? Avoiding the subject, are you, fumo?"

"Does that mean you're into him? Is that how we should interpret this, ron?!"

"I heard she spent the night at his house, mii. I bet they've already done it, mii."

"...You people. You deserve a taste of death." To avoid causing trouble for the restaurant, she shot one pain bullet precisely into each of the mascots. Leaving the three writhing in agony behind her, Isuzu left the yakitori bar behind.

4: Someone Uploaded the Video of a Guest Getting Hit

It had been three days since Seiya had taken up the position of acting manager.

The morning after a sleepless night, he headed for school, eyes downcast. He'd taken too many days off already; if he didn't start going to class once in a while, people would start getting suspicious.

With nothing else to do on the crowded train, he booted up his smartphone and checked the hits on the video. ".....?" He instinctively rubbed his eyes. The hits for the "Everything 30 Yen" swimsuit video were at 8,873.

When he'd checked last night before he'd gone to bed, they had been at 218. From that to 8,873? It was hard to believe it could see a forty-fold increase in just one night. 218 hits to 8,873 hits? It made no sense.

Holding back the butterflies rising in his stomach, he checked the hits again during the gaps between each class. After second period, they were at 12,031. During lunch, they were at 21,230. After sixth period, they were over 40,000 and rising so fast that each time he refreshed the data, the number had increased by the hundreds.

"It seems a different video went viral. Most people who watched the promotion video arrived there via a recommended link..." Isuzu informed Seiya as he arrived in his office at the park. He had run straight there after school.

"A different video...?" he asked.

"It's the video of Moffle's fight," she told him. "Another guest must have filmed his attack on the father, and then uploaded the video to the Internet."

"What?!" Seiya tried accessing it with a nearby laptop. The limited information provided by his smartphone hadn't made it clear, but now it was obvious. One of the "related videos" to Seiya's swimsuit video had acquired

over 190,000 hits. The title was “Theme Park Mascot Knocks Out Delinquent.”

He clicked it, and indeed, it was a recording of Moffle’s fight with the guest family from the day before. One of the other guests must have shot it in the confusion, left before Seiya and Isuzu came running, and then uploaded it to the video site later.

In terms of format, it was a lot like any other fight video you might see online; it started with the man shouting abuses at Moffle, who was outside the video frame. There was no explanation of what had led up to it.

The man’s threatening rant lasted about ten seconds. It was quite an uncomfortable scene.

The audio quality was poor, so it was hard to hear anything Moffle was saying. It just sounded like he was shouting “Fumomo, fumo, fumomomo!”

Then, the man charged at Moffle. Just as tensions were at their peak, Moffle executed a precise sidestep of the man’s strike, followed by a perfect hook to his jaw. The hit took the man down, then Moffle punched the air with a swift one-two before striking a taunting pose. That was the end of the video.

“Mmgh...” Seiya groaned.

In reality, Moffle was equally at fault. But taken out of context, it looked incredibly thrilling.

Most of the comments on the video were positive.

One read, “Nice job. Really cathartic for us in service industries.”

Another: “That hook was on point. Mascot’s hella strong.”

Another: “What park is this? I gotta go see!”

Of course, there were critical comments, too. For instance: “What kind of amusement park hits their own customers?” and “This is faked, it’s stealth marketing.” But far more of the comments seemed to find the fight entertaining than not.

The hit count was almost 200,000.

On top of that, the first link in the fight’s “related videos” was the promotion

video, with its thumbnail of three beautiful girls in swimsuits. Well, at least it was serving its purpose of drawing the eye.

In short, the Moffle fight video had gone viral, and it was channeling traffic to the promotion video.

“The hits are still going up,” Isuzu observed helpfully. “This is a good sign, isn’t it?”

“Hmm...” Seiya was noncommittal.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You don’t look happy.”

“Well, it’s good news, but...” He was hesitant to celebrate. After all—
“Moffu.” He looked up and saw Moffle, who was standing at the entrance to the office. He was leaning against the frame with an air of perfect smugness about him.

“Moffle,” Isuzu greeted him. “Your video seems to be a hit.”

“I know, fumo. I’ve been hearing about it all day. But... hah, I’m not AmaBri’s headlining mascot for nothing, fumo. I have that certain, you know... charisma?”

That bastard, Seiya thought. I just knew he’d try to rub my nose in it.

“It takes a certain star power to turn unfortunate circumstances to gold,” Moffle remarked casually. “I’m so talented, fumo, I even frighten me. I guess it goes to show... an amateur child might attempt to be clever, but he’ll always pale before real talent, fumo.” Moffle looked down his nose at Seiya, grinning nastily. ...In reality, Moffle was much shorter than him. Yet in this moment, he somehow seemed to tower over him.

“Ngh...” Seiya turned his eyes down, shoulders trembling.

Moffle continued, “So, hmmm... Kanie-kun. How about that video of yours, fumo? The three girls in swimsuits? Hah, you put a lot of thought into that, didn’t you? You were so excited. But, too bad. Did you really think it was going to explode in popularity? The world doesn’t cater to such naivete. Heh heh heh...”

Dammit. It was annoying. Really annoying. To make it worse, he couldn’t even

say that Moffle was wrong.

“It’s just a coincidence that it went over well,” Isuzu interrupted. “I don’t know who uploaded it, but you should be grateful that they edited it in such a flattering way. They could have just as easily made you out to be the villain.”

“Moffu...” Her perfectly accurate observation caused Moffle to lower his eyes shamefully.

“Now... I believe you had something to say, Kanie-kun?” she continued. “The petty competition aside.”

“...I did, actually.” Seiya took a deep breath, shaking off his embarrassment and anger. “...There are about 50,000 hits on the 30 yen promotion video. It will probably peak tonight, and then the views will die off tomorrow. We’ll be lucky if it hits 100,000.”

“Fumo...”

“On top of that, there’s the fact that the people watching the video are all over Japan. Even if people in Hokkaido and Okinawa get interested in AmaBri, there’s no way they’re going to come here on a whim. So, how many people who watch a video like that will ever come here? One in ten? No—fewer than that. We’ll be lucky to get one in fifty.”

In other words, two percent. And even that might be optimistic...

“So, for instance, if 100,000 people see the advertisement, then that translates into 2,000 visits to the park. And it will probably be even fewer than that, given the geographical difficulties I mentioned—more like 1,000, or even less. What I’m saying is that just because the video goes viral doesn’t necessarily mean we can count on more guests.”

“If that’s the case, why did you put us through that ordeal?” Isuzu asked him, her gaze understandably resentful.

“Because I’d rather have 1,001 than 1,000,” Seiya responded resolutely.

Moffle and Isuzu’s eyes went wide.

“Get every single person that we can,” he told them. “That’s what we have to do, right now.”

A brilliant scheme wasn't just going to come out of thin air, after all. For now, they had to focus on getting every individual they could to the park. They needed to be willing to do anything to make that happen—that was the only way they stood a chance.

“.....”

He hadn't intended to express his desperation openly like this, but Moffle and Isuzu still seemed to take something from his words. “...I see what you mean, fumo,” Moffle said. He was no longer smug, nor was he smiling. “I'll be going now. The guests are waiting, fumo.”

Moffle left, leaving Seiya and Isuzu together in the office.

“...I think Moffle just realized that you're serious,” she finally said.

“Did he?”

“Yes. And more than that, I think he thinks you won this round.”

“Won?” *That's a strange thing to say, Seiya thought. I was just describing my approach to the problem.*

“You're trying to get every single guest you can,” Isuzu explained. “Meanwhile, Moffle slipped away from his onstage post to mock you... Remembering his duty likely sobered him up.”

“Ahh... I see.” It seemed the rat had more than his share of pride in his work. He probably couldn't bear to just stand around here after hearing something like that.

Isuzu stuck her face out the office door into the hallway to make sure that no one was there. Then she turned around, closed the door behind her, and walked right up to Seiya. “Kanie-kun.”

“Wh-What?” Her face was close. Her large eyes were peering straight into his. Seiya turned away instinctively.

“I won't complain anymore,” she told him. “If you ask me to go out in a swimsuit again, I will. If you ask me to strip naked, I will.”

“W-Well...” he stuttered, “I don't think I'd ever ask you to strip naked...”

“...I see,” she said, after a pause. “Then we’ll take the nakedness off the table. Anyway, you’re a good commander. That’s all I was trying to say.”

“Ahh...” he stammered idiotically, as he felt her words permeate straight through his heart.

A good commander. Was he, really? It was hard for Seiya to agree. It was still far more likely that this was all going to end in tragedy.

Isuzu turned away sharply, as if to convey that she had nothing left to say. “I’m going to go onstage, too,” she said. “Perhaps I can impress the guests with my sharpshooting prowess.”

“Don’t accidentally kill anyone, okay?” he suggested dryly.

“I’ll try not to.” Pulling out her usual musket, Isuzu left the office.

Afterwards, Seiya went about his duties: reading reports from various departments, giving out instructions, consulting with staff. He checked in on how maintenance was going, gave final decisions on advertising copy, straightened out inefficiencies, and more. Once he’d reached a stopping place, Seiya decided to see how things were looking on stage.

“Let’s see...” He slipped on his park uniform, which was a tailored dark blue suit with gold aiguillettes and an arm band that read “acting manager.” He thought he looked rather ridiculous in it, but it had long been the rule that the park’s manager should wear it when he went onstage.

He left the general affairs building and headed for the passage to the front plaza. It had gotten quite dark; close to closing time. Most of the guests were probably gone by now.

“.....?” When he came to the front plaza, Entrance Square, he found that things were surprisingly lively.

It was far from packed, of course. Given the season and the time of day, it was unsurprising that visitors were rather sparse, but the guests who were there had stopped on their way to the gate to enjoy the performances of the cast.

“Moffu! Moffu!” Moffle was juggling. Four balls became five, five became six.

He kept them all in the air with great skill, adding in a spin here and there. That he was doing it with those stubby little arms of his made it all the more impressive. As he finished, four or five guests clapped, and Moffle responded with a low bow.

“Ron! Ron!” Macaron was dancing. Early 2000’s hip-hop blasted from an old, musty CD player as he leapt and bounded furiously around on the street. Official park copy stated that Macaron specialized in ballroom dancing, but what he was performing now was hardcore break-dancing. He spun around and around on his head to the rhythm of an old Run-DMC song, prompting cheers from a handful of guests.

“Mii! Mii!” Tiramii was doing a performance on stilts. Far from being a child’s toy, the stilts were about three meters tall. Since Tiramii was a conspicuously small mascot, this led to an especially disproportionate and precarious visual. Despite the impossible-seeming posture, Tiramii ran lightly all over the square, first skipping, then hopping on one foot, then even walking backwards. The guests walking along the road cheered him on.

“.....” Isuzu was there, too. She was wearing a blindfold and neatly sniping balloons from the mouths of nervous-looking mascots—including Wanipii and Tricen—with her musket. Each time she hit her target, the five or six guests watching applauded.

Various other cast members were present, as well, doing their best to make the guests happy in ways large and small. *So this is what the security guard meant when he mentioned laughter the other day*, Seiya thought to himself. It certainly was a change from the usual.

They were giving the guests a good show, doing everything they could to entertain them. And they, in turn, were enjoying interacting with the guests.

Seiya remained standing at the passage exit, dumbfounded, for at least a full minute or two. “Why didn’t you always do it this way?” was the question that eventually drifted from his lips.

“I fear they only could because of you.” He turned in surprise to see Latifah standing there. Muse was with her; she was, apparently, the one who had guided her here.

“Latifah,” he greeted her.

“Kanie-sama,” Latifah returned. She was smiling, her eyes closed. Muse, who was holding her hand, watched her with vague concern.

“It is very clear to me... We have all changed greatly since your coming,” she continued. “We were so convinced that no future remained to us... and now, we are beginning to realize that we may have been wrong. Can you see my unc—forgive me—Moffle-san?”

Having completed his juggling show, Moffle was now causing flocks of doves to fly out of his hat, inviting another round of applause from their guests.

“Moffle-san has not worked so hard at anything in a very long time,” Latifah told him.

“Hmm...” Seiya mused. It was true that there was something genuine about his performance.

“His hard work, in turn, inspires the rest of the cast. Even if the park does close, he does not wish it to be under circumstances that would allow you to say ‘I told you so.’ I sense that motivation powerfully from him.”

“You’re saying I gave them hope, eh?” Seiya asked.

“Yes,” Latifah told him. “It is what many would call a miracle.”

More miracles, huh? Give it a rest already... Seiya kept himself from speaking that thought aloud.

So that was it; the mood was changing. But that didn’t mean it would be easy to get 100,000 guests. If the plaza was packed with people, it might inspire a little hope, but it wasn’t; it was just a family or two per mascot.

Seiya wasn’t lying when he said he wanted to bring in every guest he could. *But to get to 100,000 at this rate is—*

“Kanie-sama,” Latifah asked quietly, “Would you walk with me?”

“...?” Curious, he waited for her to say more.

“There is an hour yet until the park’s closing. If you would...” Latifah vacillated for a moment, her cheeks turning pink. “I should like you to accompany me... on

a date.”

Seiya reassured the worried Muse, then took Latifah out for a tour of the park.

Because she was blind, it was inevitable that he would end up holding her hand. Naturally, the cast members they passed looked on with shock, and even the guests, who didn’t know who they were, seemed to find them an unlikely couple.

First, they stopped by “Moffle’s House of Sweets.” This was the attraction where you shot rats with laser pistols... not exactly an attraction designed for Latifah’s enjoyment. They just wandered through until they made it to the final room, where Moffle came to meet them and take a souvenir photo. On closer inspection, it was clear that this wasn’t the real Moffle, but a person in a costume.

“Moffu!”

The real Moffle was performing in Entrance Square right now, so they must have gotten someone to fill in for him.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise,” emanated a man’s voice from within. “We’re so short-handed, you see... they even have security guards like me chipping in.”

Ahh... Seiya recognized the voice. It was the elderly security guard he frequently interacted with.

“Thanks for helping out,” he said. “I’ll make sure you get paid overtime.”

“Now, now. I’m doing this because I like it. And the guests seem to enjoy taking pictures with me more than I expected.” While he spoke, the old guard in the Moffle suit took a picture of Seiya and Latifah together.

Just before the shutter went off, Latifah hugged Seiya’s arm tight.

They went around to Tiramii’s Flower Adventure, Macaron’s Music Theater and other attractions, offering more words of gratitude to the standin mascots they encountered there.

After they'd been through quite a few of them, Seiya asked Latifah a question. "That's about it for popular attractions in this area... Is there anywhere else you'd like to go?"

Latifah responded, "Yes. I would like to ride the giant wheel."

"The Ferris wheel... huh?"

The giant wheel. It was an old attraction, predating the bubble period of the 1980s. He'd heard that it was quite popular during the years of the earlier Showa period, when the area was known as "Amagi Playground." She called it a "giant" wheel, but it was really quite humble compared to what they were building these days with modern technology—you'd probably get a better view from the roof of a local high-rise. Besides, Seiya had been hoping to avoid the Ferris wheel if possible.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather do something else?" he asked hesitantly. "It won't have much of a view. ...Ah." Remembering about Latifah's vision, Seiya stammered out a quick, "Er, sorry..."

"You need not apologize; it does not concern me," she reassured him. "I merely wish to ride the Ferris wheel."

"If you're sure, I... I don't mind." he said, feeling sweat start to rise on his back.

"Then, if you please," she requested brightly.

He took Latifah's hand and guided her on board the Ferris wheel. The park was just about to close; there were almost no guests left.

After the car doors closed, he spoke up. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but... You can't see the view, right? Why the interest in the Ferris wheel?"

"Ah. It is true that I cannot see the view..." she trailed off. "But I understand that there was a time when I could, although it was so long ago that I no longer remember..."

"...?" He waited for her to say more.

"Nevertheless," she continued, "I take some small comfort in the sensation of this Ferris wheel swaying: the vibrations, the creaks, the hardness of the seat

upon my backside... It is something that I wished to enjoy with you."

"Ah-ha..." Seiya felt as though some of the things Latifah was saying were going over his head. He ended up putting it out of his mind, with the thought that as a blind person, she would inevitably be motivated by things beyond his comprehension.

Under normal circumstances, he might have been more curious, but—"We've gotten pretty high up, huh?" he whispered, rubbing lightly at his chest.

The Ferris wheel wasn't as tall as all that. Even so, they had roughly reached the height of a building's fourth floor. The surrounding attractions were now just a collection of roofs, and those "vibrations" and "creaks" that Latifah had talked about weren't helping. His heart had started to race.

"How high might we be by now?" she asked.

"Hmm? Uh... If it were a clock, we'd be at about 10:00?" He couldn't keep his voice from cracking.

Ah, dammit, he thought, We aren't even at the top yet? We still have to go higher? Give me a break...

"Kanie-sama?" Latifah asked, sounding concerned. "Are you all right?"

"Uh? Wh-What do you mean?"

"Your voice is trembling..." she told him.

"I d-d-don't think it is..." Seiya stammered back.

While the Ferris wheel wasn't anywhere near the size of huge modern ones, it sat on one of the highest points of the Tama Hills, which made the view surprisingly good. He could see the whole glittering skyline of western Tokyo. It was like jewels scattered in night. The sprawl of twinkling lights extended on to the horizon—so far-distant that he'd have to strain his eyes to see them. It was a view that couldn't be replicated in pictures or videos.

"How do you find it, Kanie-sama?" Latifah asked, eyes closed calmly.

"Um... i-it's very beautiful," he admitted. "M-Maybe not a 100,000 dollar view, but... p-pretty good, y'know?"

“Kanie-sama? Your voice is cracking...”

Like I care! We aren't even at the peak yet. If this was a clock, we'd still only be at around 11:30. We have to go even higher? Give me a break...

“Kanie-sama?”

How much longer was he going to have to sit here while they kept rising higher and higher? He couldn't breathe, and his back was soaked with sweat. Each sway of the car caused his sanity to slip a little bit further.

He couldn't even imagine looking out the window now. *No more. No more. Get me out of here!*

“Ah... Kanie-sama, are you afraid of heights, by chance?” Latifah inquired.

“O-Of course not!” he protested in a strangled voice.

Latifah seemed stunned for a moment, then slumped over. “Forgive me,” she apologized. “It was an insulting thing to ask.”

“Oh, no... It's okay, but... er, I... It's just...” Seiya loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt. To keep from looking outside, he closed his eyes tightly and shook his head.

His only choice was to distract himself by talking. What was the point of putting on airs now? It wouldn't get him anywhere.

“I'm not great with heights...” he admitted.

Seiya's acrophobia had first manifested around middle school. He hadn't minded heights at all in the lower elementary school grades. He'd even engaged in a silly “test of courage” on the 10th floor of a local building with his friends.

But at some point, he'd found he couldn't handle them anymore. This came about during the period of his life when he was a busy child star acting at his parents' whim, so it might have some connection to that. Whatever the cause was, though, there had come a day, in his sixth year of elementary school, that Seiya suddenly realized he couldn't even bring himself to approach the rail around the roof of his school.

It hadn't happened overnight. For some time leading up to that, he'd noticed that his heart would start beating faster whenever he climbed up to a tall place.

The distant ground below would seem to distort in his vision, and rise up at him. He'd lose his sense of equilibrium.

It was that day in the spring in his sixth year of elementary school, then, that he knew it for sure.

Even after he quit show business, the phobia hadn't gone away, and he'd been afraid of tall places ever since. He'd even been hesitant to ride that silly roller coaster with Sento Isuzu the first time he came here.

Seiya explained all this to Latifah, while she did nothing but listen and offer the occasional prompt to continue. "—And so, I... I'm still afraid of things like this. I-It's not quite a panic attack... As long as I close my eyes and keep talking, I can bear it, so... so... you know. Guh, how far are we now? Dammit..." Despite what he claimed, he still couldn't bring himself to open his eyes.

"At the moment... if this were a clock, we would be at around two o'clock," she told him.

"I see..." he said faintly, and then "Y-You can tell?"

"Yes. I can tell from the sounds it makes and the weight of my body," she explained. "Do not worry. We are descending."

Gently, her soft hand took Seiya's; it was cool and smooth. For some reason, it caused a thrill to shoot through him, even more intense than the one he'd felt when she'd kissed him.

"You are safe," she repeated. Her voice, so kind, seemed to permeate his being.

He realized that his legs had stopped shaking.

"Take a deep breath and open your eyes," she advised him. "Everything will be as it was."

"....." He did as he was told.

She was right; he didn't feel afraid anymore. He looked out the window and saw that the car was now fairly low to the ground.

"Do you feel better?" she inquired gently.

“Yeah... I’m okay.” Seiya felt a bit embarrassed, but this was far outstripped by his sense of relief. He felt like a fool to have ever put on airs around her.

“I must beg your forgiveness,” Latifah apologized. “I asked for something terribly selfish, being unaware of your discomfort.” Her voice was hushed.

Why was it that he was the one who wanted to apologize to her? “It’s okay,” he said. “I thought I could grin and bear it, so... Don’t let it bother you.”

“I shall try,” she told him regretfully. “And yet... ah...”

“...?” Seiya waited for her to finish.

“No,” she said at last. “It is nothing.”

“Hey, come on,” he protested. “Now I have to know. Tell me!”

“All right. Only do not be angry with me for saying it...” Her smile was shy, but with a playful edge. “I thought you looked rather cute that way, Kanie-sama.”

“.....” For some reason, he didn’t dislike it. He felt a bit like a boy being patted on the head by a woman several years his senior.



They toured a few more attractions, then he said goodbye to Latifah and went back to work.

They must have responded promptly to his requests for improvements, because Seiya found each attraction far more acceptable than it had been on Sunday.

The hospitality that Moffle and the others showed the guests had also clearly improved. They were acting out of desperation, but the guests didn't seem to have noticed at all. That was another good sign; even if they were desperate, a good entertainer should never let that show.

The park had improved markedly over the last few days.

But wait—had it really? Was it that the park had improved, or was it just that his feelings about it had changed? In other words, was he biased? The first time he'd come to the park, he'd engaged in everything grudgingly because Isuzu had dragged him along. Today, his investment in the park was much higher because of the responsibility he'd taken on.

Was it subjective feeling, or objective fact? At that moment, Seiya couldn't be sure.

He finished up his bookkeeping, and was about to head home when Isuzu came by to tell him the day's attendance numbers: "2,928."

"What?"

"2,928," she said again. "Almost double what it was yesterday."

Today was Thursday. It wasn't a day when you'd expect a large influx of visitors—you'd expect about the same amount that you'd had on Wednesday. Instead, attendance had doubled.

"Incidentally," she remarked, "this is also the best attendance we've had for a Thursday in several years."

"Yeah, I know." Seiya had already gone through the previous years' data. It was certainly an exceptional figure.

"It appears the 30 yen promotion is having an effect," Isuzu concluded.

“Definitely. But... even for that...” Seiya hesitated.

Even for that, these numbers are higher than I imagined, Seiya thought. I’d expected a 50% increase at best—is there something at play besides the 30 yen campaign?

“What is it?” she asked.

“No... it’s nothing,” he concluded.

The improved performance among the cast wouldn’t be raising attendance so soon. Even if it caused guests to think positively about the time they spent here, encouraging them to come back and recommend it to others, it would take months for such word of mouth to get around. It wouldn’t manifest over just a few days. Better to chalk it up to the 30 yen campaign being more effective than expected.

Even so, Seiya was compelled to ask Isuzu. “Sento—?”

“Yes?”

“Have you noticed a change in the work ethic of that... rat and his friends, these last few days?”

Isuzu snorted, as if the answer was obvious. “Of course I have. I’ve never seen them work so hard before. And...”

“And—?” he pressed.

Isuzu hesitated. “I can’t fully explain it. But the feeling I sense most of all is that... they’re enjoying their work.”

[Today’s park attendance: 2,928. (92,922 from goal) / 10 days left.]

The next day’s attendance was 3,411. Even taking into account that it was a Friday, it was still the best attendance they’d seen in years.

The promotional video which they’d put on the internet had had a longer tail than Seiya had expected as well, and by Friday afternoon it was nearing 90,000 hits.

That morning, a local news station in Tokyo sent their business team in to do

a story. They took some footage of the hustle and bustle at AmaBri, which they were expected to use that night in a story about their 30 yen campaign.

“To think we could get that show to give us coverage... I’m shocked,” Tricen of the PR department mused as the news team drove away.

“I pulled a few strings,” Seiya murmured grudgingly. “There was a producer I worked for back in the day who’s pretty high up in the industry, by now. I never cared to see him again, but... desperate times and all. I decided to give him a call.”

“Ahh. Is that so?” Tricen asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“I have some dirt on him,” Seiya shrugged. “His romantic life and such.”

“Oh-ho.” Tricen didn’t know about Seiya’s past, but he may have realized it was complicated, as he didn’t press him any further.

Seiya continued, “We’ll have a few more news teams coming in tomorrow too, starting in the morning. You have the full schedule, right?”

“Yes, I do, and I am prepared to give my utmost to the teams that arrive,” Tricen confirmed. “...Especially at 11:00, when the anchor Oishi-san arrives with her fabulous rack. I, the humble Tricen, shall hunch over more than ever.”

“Maybe I’d better put you on trash pickup instead...” Seiya considered.

[Today’s park attendance: 3,411. (89,511 from goal) / 9 days left.]

On Saturday, guest attendance increased dramatically. This was thanks both to the economic news report that had aired the night before and the brief variety show segment that had been dedicated to it that morning. The promotional video online, which was even now racking up hits, had likely played a part as well. Their newspaper insert advertisements had also gone out that morning.

The clear increase in attendance lifted the morale of the various cast members. Tricen and the other department heads came by the office to offer reports, most of which were positive. Each time, Seiya plastered on an enthusiastic smile, nodded, and said “Let’s just keep it up.”

There was one member of the cast who was less than pleased, though. Ashe, from the accounting department, looked sullen as she pointed out how much they were spending on advertising, sneaking in a few barbs about his short tenure there. Ashe's concerns were understandable, of course, but he was in no position to accede to her requests; as he'd said countless times before, a drowning man couldn't be picky about the beach he landed on.

In turn, Ashe didn't force the issue, but just before leaving, she muttered to him, "Attendance *has* gone up. But even at this pace, we won't come close to our goal."

"Yeah," he sighed, "Well... I know that."

"And... why, when we're already struggling, are you diverting resources to restoring the unused second park?" she questioned. "We already ran maintenance on the stadium at the end of last year."

She was referring to the stadium that he'd seen with Isuzu and Muse a few days before; Seiya had personally ordered its maintenance and cleaning.

"Don't worry about it," Seiya said bluntly.

"But—"

"I'm getting it ready for if we need it," he told her firmly. "Don't ask me any more than that. Don't mention it to anyone else, either."

As Ashe left, looking pensive, Isuzu came to check in on him. "I see you held your own with Ashe."

"She'll just have to suck it up for now," he muttered.

"I see." Isuzu nodded readily and opened up the paper in her hand. "I have today's attendance figures: 8,168."

It was over double that of the day before. *At this rate*, her eyes seemed to say, *just maybe*— But Seiya avoided her hopeful gaze as he responded, "I don't know..."

[Today's park attendance: 8,168. (81,343 from goal) / 8 days left.]

As expected, things were even better on Sunday. Their advertising campaigns

over the past week had probably paid off. Moffle and the rest of the cast threw even more of themselves into their interactions with the guests, and the guests clearly seemed to enjoy their time there.

After finishing negotiations with a few transportation companies, Seiya decided to run his inspection of the park: It was clear that the cast were enjoying their work. Everyone he saw was smiling. There were still a lot of issues with the facilities, but the mood pervading the park suggested that even a long-failing park could still bring it when they had to.

After closing time, Isuzu brought him the final attendance figures. They hadn't quite broken 10,000, but they still managed an incredible 9,821 people.

[Today's park attendance: 9,821. (71,522 from goal) / 7 days left.]

The next day was Monday. The moment they were back into the weekdays, the number of guests dropped conspicuously.

Seiya went from school straight to the park, and by the time he'd finished receiving status reports on the improvements being made to the various highly inefficient management systems, it was closing time. Isuzu came by to give him the numbers: "2,688."

"...I see," he concluded.

Inevitable, since it was a weekday. And it was a far greater number than last Monday's...

But...

He still had to bring in 70,000 people, with just six days remaining. How could they accomplish that with 2,700 people a day? No matter how he played with the figures, it was utterly impossible.

There just wasn't enough time. Spread out over a longer period, the 30 yen campaign and advertising blitz might have worked. The cast's hard work was gradually paying off, too.

But they just needed more time for it all to produce real results—the situation wasn't going to change in the mere ten-or-so days that they had.

The numbers, which had been trending downwards, were now picking up. That was a considerable achievement by itself, but their circumstances wouldn't wait.

"It's a weekday, so... it's inevitable, I suppose," Isuzu added. "I think that if we can maintain these numbers through the week, things will turn around again on the weekend."

"Yeah, maybe," Seiya said in a quiet voice. "And other than that, we just wait for a miracle."

Isuzu knitted her brow at the words that were so unlike him.

[Today's park attendance: 2,688. (68,834 from goal) / 6 days left.]

Tuesday's attendance numbers were even worse: down to 1,935. The hits on the 30 yen campaign video had slowed to a trickle, and their other promotion schemes had run equally dry. The cast were still throwing themselves into their work, but nothing they did for their guests was going to significantly raise the park's attendance now.

It really was impossible.

The only thing keeping the park from sinking back into despair was the impressive work ethic of Moffle and the others; they were going to do everything that they possibly could. Not only were they working to please the guests, but they helped out on maintenance, worked diligently on online promotion, and did everything else they could think of, from heading up shopping trips to running traffic control. If a member of the cast had a breakdown, they did everything they could to cheer them up.

Seiya was heading home in low spirits after finishing his office work, when he ran into a man standing in front of the passage exit: it was Kurisu Takaya, from Amagi Development. A visitor ID card hung from his neck. "Hey, there. We meet again."

I wish we hadn't, thought Seiya.

He was here, most likely, to check their attendance numbers. The attendance ticker at the entrance gate was strictly locked to prevent tampering. Checking

could only be done under the mutual observation of Amagi Development and the park. In other words, it was impossible to lie about their attendance.

“So you decided to work for them, eh?” Kurisu commented. “How eccentric of you.”

“What business is it of yours?” Seiya asked dismissively.

“Rock bottom prices, advertising... the park’s really pulling out all the stops. Too little, too late, of course. Would you be playing some part in that?” Kurisu probably wouldn’t know that the high school student Seiya was serving as acting manager. The man approached, leaning in close, as if to feel him out.

“No,” Seiya lied. “I’m just doing odd jobs.”

“Oh-ho?” Kurisu’s eyes were cold, yet intensely curious. Perhaps he knew that they had tapped one of Seiya’s old connections for publicity? “Oh, another thing... I saw a truck labeled ‘Yanokuchi Cleaning’ going down one of your service roads. I’m not familiar with them... do you know anything about it?”

“No,” Seiya denied flatly. “Goodbye.”

He tried to leave to put an end to the conversation, but Kurisu pursued, doggedly. “Don’t be like that. I just find it odd... The park’s usual cleaning service is a company called ‘Amagi Maintenance.’ It just seems a bit strange that a different cleaning company would be going into the park, don’t you think?”

“I really wouldn’t know,” Seiya shrugged.

“I see, I suppose you wouldn’t,” Kurisu agreed. “Do excuse me. Ha ha ha.”

He was talking about the company they had hired to get the second park cleaned up and ready. Yanokuchi Cleaning had agreed to do the job for a much more reasonable price than the cleaning company contracted by the city and Amagi Development. Even if he criticized him over that, though, Seiya could probably stall by playing dumb...

“Still,” Kurisu mused, “I just can’t seem to explain it. Since last week, it’s as if... there’s been a new spring in the step of the management here...”

“Huh?”

“It’s like someone very intelligent has been added to the management team. Kodama-kun—excuse me, Kanie-kun.” Kurisu checked the ID card around Seiya’s neck once again, then peered into his face. “Would you happen to know anything about it?”

“...Are you suggesting that I put them up to this?” Seiya demanded.

“Hmm, well, call it a feeling,” Kurisu mused.

That’s a lie, Seiya thought. This is more than “a feeling.”

The man was sharp. He hadn’t forgotten about Seiya, or the way he had run the “burden-per-family” math in his head that day in the conference room. He’d noticed the recent changes in the park, and he had his guesses as to who had made that happen.

Seiya wished he hadn’t spoken so carelessly that day. But then, at the time, he’d had no intention of becoming the acting manager... it couldn’t be helped.

But wait...

What if someone in the cast was passing information to Amagi Development? Then Kurisu, knowing everything, might just be trying to trick him into revealing something.

“I’m afraid you think a bit too highly of me...” Seiya said with an awkward smile. He was mimicking the sort of bashfulness a typical high school student might feel when receiving praise from an adult.

While he went about his performance, he ran a swift calculation. *Should I use my magic?* No, not yet. For now, he should rely on his powers of observation to see their game of cat-and-mouse through.

“I’ll leave it up to your imagination,” he told Kurisu. “Goodbye.”

That line, too, was a performance—like he was denying it, humbly, while being privately flattered. It was unlikely to fool Kurisu, but at the very least, it should keep him from finding out what he was really feeling.

Seiya walked away.

[Today’s park attendance: 1,935. (66,899 from goal) / 5 days left.]

The next day's attendance figure was similar. It was a little bit higher than the usual Wednesday for the season, but no more than that.

In between his usual duties, Seiya checked things out onstage. There was a nice mood going on there: People working their hardest so they'd have no regrets; people cheering up others regardless of how they themselves felt; people believing in that last shred of hope...

The zeal of the Maple Land cast was inspiring even the part-time workers to improve their attitudes. Of course, there were a few here and there who had given up hope, but Seiya moved them into backstage positions instead.

"Everyone's really working hard," Seiya said to Latifah, in the Maple Castle kitchen, just after the park closed. "But... there's no way we'll meet our target attendance, at this rate. No matter what we do this weekend, we're going to wind up about 40,000 short."

"I see..." Latifah whispered, pausing in the middle of her task. She had been mashing potatoes for croquettes, which were to be sold at the concession stands the next day. There was something very cute about the small girl dressed an apron, sleeves rolled up, holding that very large bowl.

"If that is how you feel, Kanie-sama... then it surely must be so..." she whispered softly, eyes downcast.

Restraining the urge to put his hands on her delicate shoulders, Seiya continued, "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Yes?"

"If the park closes..." he trailed off, "what's going to happen to you?"

"I cannot say," she told him.

"Come on..."

"But I truly do not know," Latifah said, then smiled. "We denizens of the various magical domains—including my own home of Maple Land—cannot survive without *animus*, the feelings of joy drawn from the people of the mortal realm. The reason that we run amusement parks is to gather enough *animus* to sustain us. And I... I require more of it than anyone."

“...?” After a pause, Seiya continued, “I don’t really understand...”

“I am cursed,” she told him simply.

“Cursed?”

“Let me tell it to you as a fairy tale,” she prefaced, all the while focused on her cooking. “Long ago, Maple Land lived in fear of a terrible dragon. Armies rose to face the threat, but the dragon repelled them all. Then, one day, a magician appeared. He said to the king of Maple Land, ‘I shall slay the dragon for you. But in return, you must give me the princess’s hand in marriage.’”

Seiya waited for her to continue.

“The desperate king agreed to the bargain, and the magician kept his promise. He slew the dragon, then returned to the king, and he said, ‘Now, give me your daughter’s hand.’ But the king loved his daughter too much to surrender her. He broke his word and sent his armies to slay the magician.”

A fairy tale princess was telling him a fairy tale. It was a strange feeling. But rather than make some oafish comment like “it’s the oldest story in the book,” Seiya simply urged her to continue. “So, what happened next?”

“Maple Land’s brave general drove the magician to the edge of a cliff. Just before he fell, the magician said to the general, ‘I have placed a curse on your princess.’ Then, he plummeted into the darkness below. ...Soon after, the princess fell ill. The arms and legs with which she had once run and climbed through hills and fields now grew frail and thin; her eyes went blind; and day after day, she grew weaker.”

“Was it the curse?” Seiya asked.

“Yes,” she affirmed. “As I explained, we require *animus* to live, and the magician’s curse starved the princess of that *animus*. The king’s doctors were helpless to save her. They decided that the only way to save her was to send her to the mortal realm, to a place rich in *animus*, where she could rest and recover.”

“And the best place to find *animus* would be...”

“Yes. An amusement park.” Latifah stopped again and let out a sigh.

The fragrant mix of mashed potatoes, ground meat, and special spices tickled Seiya's nose. He gulped, but not because of the appetizing aroma. "You're saying that the princess from that fairy tale... is you?"

"Yes."

He frowned. "Then you'll be in trouble if the park shuts down, right?"

"You are correct." She let out another sigh followed by a weak smile. "Perhaps I shall seek room and board, or even employment, at some other amusement park. Although, I am uncertain that I can work properly in my condition..."

"Are... Are you okay with that?" he asked.

"I have no other choice."

Just then, Seiya felt an urge to use his magic—his power, to read someone's mind, that he could only use once per person. He wanted to know how Latifah really felt.

How can you be so okay with this? he wondered. Aren't you afraid? Aren't you angry? Don't you want to break down crying and cling to someone for support? How could he take on her burden unless he knew?

It would be easy to do. He just had to ask her "how do you really feel?" and then use his magic.

How long are you going to cling to that ammo? he thought to himself. If there's a time to use a grenade, it's now, isn't it? There's no point in holding onto it until you beat the game. Go on, use it.

Seiya opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again—then at last, he said this: "When are you going to fry those croquettes?"

He concentrated. He couldn't hear Latifah's voice.

"...They are to be sold at the concession stands tomorrow, so I shall fry them in the morning," she told him. "If you wish, I could fry a few now."

"...Sure." Seiya answered vaguely, feeling a little disoriented.

It seemed his magic wouldn't work on Latifah. Or maybe he'd accidentally

used up his one shot on her when she first gave him his magic?

Well, either way, it was just as well. He'd been planning to waste his magic on an irrelevant question, anyway; he didn't want to have that kind of calculation between them.

"Kanie-sama?"

"Right," he said. "I'll have two. I've gotten pretty hungry."

The indecision fogging his mind seemed to clear. In that moment, Seiya decided that he had to do everything he could.

[Today's park attendance: 2,102. (64,797 from goal) / 4 days left.]

It was Thursday. In his work routine, Tiramii took a bus to the park in the morning. He spent the trip fiddling around with his smartphone and reading news off of the Internet. *A financial scandal with a member of the Diet, a traffic accident in some rural area, rioting in some foreign country, a Keidanren bigwig saying something stupid...* He skimmed through one after another, until he came upon a small article in the local news section: <Fire at Kajinomoto Stadium>

Kajinomoto Stadium was a well-known soccer stadium located in Amagi's neighboring city, Chofu. Melody Shibasaki played there, and Tiramii had gone there to watch a few matches.

He clicked on the article to read more.

《A fire broke out before dawn at Kajinomoto Stadium in Chofu City. The Chofu Fire Department responded quickly. The fire was small in scale, and quickly extinguished. There were no injuries. A fault in the electrical system is believed to be responsible for the fire, but investigations are ongoing.》

It was a very short article. It had happened in the middle of the night, and nobody had been hurt. The fire had been small, and easily brought under control.

It's a pretty old stadium, so I guess it's just showing its age, Tiramii thought.

"Mii?"

But wait a minute...

It was the second week of March. Thursday.

A bunch of J-League teams had their opening games this Saturday, and Melody Shibasaki was one of them. They were supposed to play at Kajinomoto Stadium against the Kurawa Mets. Tiramii remembered specifically because Macaron had offered to get him good tickets, but he was scheduled to work that weekend. And because it was probably the last weekend the park would be in business, he'd choked down his tears and turned down Macaron's offer.

A fire with an important match just two days away. Were they going to be okay?

"This is not okay at all," the manager of the company that ran Kajinomoto Stadium lamented at the emergency conference that was called for the stadium's affiliates. "The fire itself was small... but the firefighters used a lot of water putting it out. We can't blame them for that, of course, but it flooded the stadium's electrical facilities and several nearby installations."

A series of slides presented heartrending shots of the damage done: a worker, trying to pump out thigh-high water; a firefighter, in front of a charred-black electric panel, yelling "Get out of here!" at the cameraman.

"We'll have to replace all of the panels around it," he concluded regretfully. "The parts themselves aren't terribly expensive, but it's an old facility, so it'll take over a week to get replacements in, at the earliest. We'll also have to run a full inspection of the undamaged parts to prevent a repeat incident... and there are only so many personnel who can do that."

"So, you're saying...?" a representative from Kajinomoto Stadium's biggest investor asked, rubbing his temples.

"I'm saying there's no way we'll make it in time for the opening game in two days," the manager said flatly. "The match starts after 5:00 PM, so we'll need lighting, but we can only generate the bare minimum of electricity right now. In the unlikely event that we *could* get the grounds *barely* lit, we couldn't do anything else, not even warming up the franks in the concession stands."

“This is outrageous...” the representative objected vigorously.

“We don’t have a choice,” the manager told him. “There’s precedent for canceling matches due to hurricanes and earthquakes; we should write up an announcement to that effect.”

“But it’s the opening match! It’s their J1 inaugural, and they’re facing a high-ranked team from last year...” the representative trailed off. “Everyone’s going to want to see it! There must be something we can do...”

An uncomfortable silence hung over the conference room.

The tickets were already sold. How much would it cost to refund all the ticket holders and prevent a riot? The fire insurance certainly wouldn’t cover it.

“We’ll have to talk to the League and see if we can adjust the schedule,” the manager finally said. “I believe there’s precedent for weekday and back-to-back weekend matches.”

The room flew into an uproar.

“You can’t do that! It’s too hard on the players! We can’t put that burden on them!”

“It’s one thing to do it for a hurricane, but for a simple fire...!”

“We had to beg for that broadcast time slot! We can’t just...!”

The conference had descended into a free-for-all, with everyone yelling out whatever was on their minds.

“Um, excuse me.” Eventually, the legal adviser for one of the sponsors raised his hand. He normally didn’t speak very often, and the only opinion he ever offered when asked was “It sounds good to me.”

Nobody was going to listen to him just because he raised his hand.

“Um, excuse me!” he said again.

At last, the group stopped arguing and turned their eyes to him.

“What is it?”

“I think we have an old contract for an eventuality like this. Hold on a minute, let me see...” The adviser began fiddling with the tablet in his hand.

The older members scowled at the gesture, while the man's peers craned their necks out in interest, curious to see what app he was using.

"Ah... yes, here it is," he finally said. "An advertising deal forged in 1993 between Kajinomoto Stadium, Chofu City, Amagi City, and Maple Enterprises..."

"Maple Enterprises?" someone asked.

"The company that operates Amagi Brilliant Park," the legal adviser explained. "You remember them, don't you? They're an old amusement park in Amagi, one city over."

The majority of those present, perhaps remembering it from more prosperous times, gazed up at the ceiling and nodded. "Oh, I remember. They did have an amusement park, didn't they?"

"And it's still running? Huh..."

"I mean, we still had old posters for it in our stadium, didn't we?"

"Now that you mention it..."

While the group murmured among themselves, the legal adviser continued: "Here's the relevant part of the agreement. It appears that Amagi Brilliant Park has a stadium on its grounds, and according to the contract, if anything happens to render our stadium unusable, they're supposed to offer us use of theirs for next to nothing. All we need to do is cover the cost of utilities. In exchange, we just had to offer them a discount to advertise in our stadium..."

It seemed that they were allowed to use the amusement park's soccer venue for free. The League representative did some more checking and found out that, surprisingly, the stadium was usable. Stadiums for official games were held to strict standards, but the park's had passed those standards every year.

And so, the Kajinomoto Stadium executives offered their opinions: "Now, just hang on a minute— Our stadium has a seating capacity of 50,000. And since it's the opening day game, it'll be nearly sold out. There's no way some random amusement park venue can hold them all!"

"But, according to the attachment, their maximum attendance is pretty much the same..."

“Oh, please! I’ve never heard of a stadium that large in Amagi. It’s got to be an exaggeration.”

The executives’ doubts were natural... But, what if it was true? One man in attendance, the team’s general manager, raised his hand.

“But if it *is* usable, then it’s perfect,” he said. “It’s just one city over, after all. It would keep confusion to a minimum. Why don’t we just call Maple Enterprises and see?”

“Well... fair enough,” one of the executives concluded. “...Go on, do it.”

A secretary nodded, looked up the number, and placed the call. For a few minutes, the only sound in the conference room was the secretary’s voice, explaining about their dire situation and the contract to the person on the other end of the phone.

As the rest of the group watched, the secretary spoke a ‘thank you’ and then hung up. “I spoke to the park’s manager.”

“What did they say?”

“We’re free to use it any time. They can even accommodate the whole crowd...”

About an hour after the call, a dozen or so Kajinomoto Stadium representatives stopped by Amagi Brilliant Park to investigate the venue. It would seem odd for the school-aged Seiya to introduce himself as acting manager, so they got a member of the cast named Wrenchy-kun to show them around instead. Wrenchy-kun, from the Mechanical Nation of Zola, was a member of the maintenance crew who typically kept the park facilities in working order. On orders from Seiya, he’d spent the past week cleaning and preparing the giant stadium for use.

As his name would suggest, he basically looked like a giant wrench with arms and legs, but the Kajinomoto Stadium people didn’t seem to notice anything strange about him. This was, apparently, thanks to the power of the strange amulet that members of the cast wore to help them live their lives outside the park.

Seiya and Isuzu, acting like part-timer clerks, followed after Wrenchy-kun. A group of men in suits walking around with a bizarre wrench monster in their midst—it was an utterly bizarre sight.

Perhaps it was his craftsman's spirit, but despite his cute-sounding name, Wrenchy-kun wasn't the smiling type. His tone was gruff as he ran through his explanations: "Roughly speaking, there are four entrances," he said. "We should be able to match the seating assignments on the tickets with just a few slight adjustments."

They went over the procedures for getting fans to the stadium, potential concessions and kiosk locations, the number of bathrooms, routes for bringing in equipment and materials, player facilities and lockers, the state of the pitch itself (of course), commentator and broadcast booths, electric displays, advertising equipment, lighting facilities, and everything else.

"If we hire a mobile base station, we should be able to accommodate cell phone reception, too," Wrenchy-kun told them. "It's at least a 30 minute walk from the two train stations, so we'll need to charter a lot of shuttle buses. ...That's all."

It was more than an hour before Wrenchy-kun wrapped up the tour of the second park's stadium.

"It's not perfect. It's not perfect, but..." the club GM, who'd come along, mused, before sinking deep into thought for a few seconds. "...Ah, excuse me," he said, apologizing for the unintended pause. "I think it could work, don't you?"

"The facilities certainly seem to be adequate. But I wonder if it would be too confusing to throw them into an unfamiliar stadium unprepared..." the League official, who'd also come along, added nervously.

They were all worried. When facing a decision that had no precedent, hesitation was inevitable.

"Anyway, we're going to head back for now," one of the visitors said. "This isn't the place to make a decision."

"Of course," Wrenchy-kun grumped. "But try to let us know as soon as

possible.”

The Kajinomoto Stadium representatives thanked the park representatives profusely, then hurried away.

“Hey, kid... I’m not gonna push you on this, but...” As their car pulled away, Wrenchy-kun produced a cigarette, seemingly from nowhere, and lit it. It was a surreal sight, to be sure, but Seiya had grown accustomed to things like this in these past ten days. “...Did you know this would happen?”

“Like I told you in the garden,” Seiya answered evasively, “I got magic from Latifah.”

“Hmm... What was it, precognition? Well, never mind... If I’m gonna be busy, I’d better get things ready...” Wrenchy-kun walked away, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up.

“I thought your magic let you read minds,” Isuzu said once they were alone together.

“That’s right,” he confirmed.

“So you couldn’t have seen the future,” Isuzu observed.

“Maybe not,” Seiya said, his tone blank, and then swiftly walked away towards the general affairs building.

Less than an hour later, they received a call from Kajinomoto Stadium: “We want to use it. Let’s hold negotiations as soon as possible.”

Muse had finished her second performance of the day and was heading down the underground passageway for a late lunch at the employee cafeteria. Suddenly, Tiramii came running towards her from the opposite direction.

“Big news, mii! Big news, mii!” He seemed agitated about something.

He bumped into another member of the cast, spun into the wall, fell, then ran towards her again, rubbing his bumped head and shouting “Mii! Mii!” — It was rather forward, but also charming.

At least, that’s what she would have thought if he hadn’t spent her first year

at the park sexually harassing her. As a result, her response was merely polite. “Are you all right, Tiramii-san?”

“You’re so kind, Muse-chan,” he praised her effusively. “Would you please rub my bruise, mii? Not the one on my head, the one on my stomach. Actually, it’s a little lower than that...”

Creep, she nearly whispered out loud, but bit back that urge and simply asked: “Well, what’s the big news?”

“Ignored again, huh, mii? ...Well, that’s okay,” he concluded. “Anyway, it’s huge, mii! Melody Shibasaki is gonna hold their opening match at the second park stadium!”

Muse had little interest in soccer, but even she was surprised by this. “The J-League team? Why?”

“There was a fire last night and they can’t use Kajinomoto Stadium, mii,” Tiramii bleated. “We had some old contract with them, so they’re gonna use our stadium instead! We’re like a pinch hitter, mii!”

“Ahh...” Muse recalled that Tiramii was a fan of Melody Shibasaki. He was probably excited to have them playing at his workplace.

Tiramii noticed Muse’s blank expression, and chuckled smugly. “You just don’t get it, Muse-chan. To get to our stadium, they’ll have to come through AmaBri, see? *And* it’s the opening match. We’ll be getting tens of thousands of visitors, mii!”

“Wait, do you mean...” Grasping what Tiramii was saying at last, Muse’s eyes went wide.

“That’s right!” he exulted. “We might hit our attendance goal, mii!”

The word that Kanie Seiya had used back in the rooftop garden—“miracle”—flitted through the back of Muse’s mind.

That afternoon, there was a flurry of activity backstage: negotiating with the staff from Kajinomoto Stadium; planning the route to the second park; scheduling personnel increases to get the stadium fixed up; arranging shuttle

buses to carry the fans from the station...

They were all complicated tasks. Plus, they didn't have much time—they had all of 48 hours to get everything done.

Onstage, the cast were restless; while backstage, they were rushing this way and that, bellowing at each other, and trying to get everything in order to receive the crowds.

They cooperated readily with the visiting stadium staff and worked together earnestly to solve the little problems. When a bigger problem arose, Kanie Seiya would run in, giving orders with aplomb: “Do this,” “Do that,” “We’ve got something ready for that,” and the like.

Recently, Isuzu had been acting as Seiya’s secretary, which meant that she was around him often enough to notice something odd in his behavior: *Has anyone else noticed that he’s a bit mechanical today?*

“Oh, right. What’s today’s attendance?” Seiya asked Isuzu later, just before midnight. Normally, attendance numbers would be the only thing he thought about, but now they seemed to have almost slipped his mind.

“2,087,” she told him automatically. “Almost exactly the same as yesterday.”

“I see,” he said, his eyes locked on the clerical work in front of him. He seemed neither relieved nor disappointed. In fact, he didn’t seem to be feeling anything at all.

[Today’s park attendance: 2,087. (62,710 from goal) / 3 days left.]

The next day, things were even more chaotic. The game’s change of venue had been announced on all available platforms the night before, and there was no going back now.

The backstage area was packed, not just with negotiating staff, but also with workers bringing in materials for the day-before preparations. There wasn’t enough parking for all the vehicles needed, either, which caused congestion issues.

Despite all that chaos, the park still had to remain in normal working order.

Even cast members who would have spent most of their time onstage were deployed to the stadium as “reinforcements” whenever they had a free minute.

After giving out balloons to guests arriving at Entrance Square, Macaron returned backstage, only to be immediately ordered, via radio, to head to the stadium’s B-wing and help out Nakamura Construction. He ran over in a hurry, and one of the workers beckoned him over and asked him to help out with a kiosk they were building.

“Why do I have to do this stuff?” he muttered to himself, while climbing the steps with a heavy appliance. There was a queue for the service elevators, so he’d been told to use the stairs if he could.

“...Y’know, I’m happy for the help, kid. But couldn’t you lose the costume?” the elderly worker carrying the appliance with him asked.

Ah, that’s right. I forgot to wear my Lalapatch Charm. If he’d had it on, he would have appeared as a regular human staffer, but unfortunately he’d left the amulet in the locker room. Well, it didn’t matter now.

“Park motto,” he answered shortly. “There’s no one in the suits, ron.”

“Listen to you, talking like you’re hot stuff,” the worker scoffed. “This ain’t Digimall and you ain’t Mackey, y’know?”

“I really hate hearing that name, ron.”

He had just finished strenuously hauling the heavy appliance to the kiosk when he saw Tiramii tottering by. The little pink mascot was carrying a large coil of electric cable, and seemed ready to topple at any time. “Mii... mii... so heavy, mii!”

Passing by in the other direction came Wanipii, who was pushing a cart. It was filled with cardboard boxes, which were, in turn, full of goods to sell. “Outta the way, outta the way! Get outta the way or I’ll kill you, pii!”

It was one thing for Wanipii to be helping out—he never had much to do onstage, anyway. But to have headliners like himself and Tiramii splitting their time... would things really be okay in the park?

Just then, Muffle himself walked past. Things had been so chaotic today that

this was the first time Macaron had seen him. “Hey,” he said, by way of a greeting.

“Moffu.” Moffle was carrying a clipboard, and seemed to be running some kind of inspection. Maybe he’d been put in charge of directing the support personnel which the park had provided? “That’s all we need from you, Macaron,” he said. “Go back onstage, fumo.”

“I ran all the way here, carried one thing, and now you want me to go back? Give me a break, ron...” Macaron griped, but Moffle was unfazed.

“Things are chaotic right now, fumo. Just ride it out until tomorrow,” he said, with all the ease of someone discussing the weather.

“You seem a little subdued, ron.”

“Do I, fumo?”

AmaBri’s stadium would be taking over for Kajinomoto Stadium, which had been rendered unusable by a fire. If the people attending the game were being counted as park entrants, they would score tens of thousands of visitors in a single night. It was like a miracle had dropped into their laps. The entire cast was thrilled. Not even Macaron could stop his heart from fluttering in excitement.

And yet, Moffle didn’t seem to share the sentiment. He just seemed to be walking through the work he was given, completely impassive. It didn’t make sense.

They had known each other for a long time, of course, so Moffle seemed to guess what Macaron was thinking, and shrugged. “Well, we can talk about it another time, fumo. For now, just focus on your work,” he said simply, then left.

The work continued even after the park had closed for the day: the turf was scrupulously tended; medical supplies were stocked in the formerly empty infirmary; various sponsors’ advertising posters were hung up, here and there; lighting and disaster shelter tests were conducted; routes for pedestrian traffic were reviewed; and other jobs and negotiations continued throughout the night.

The park attendance was 3,573, mostly due to the Friday date. Almost nobody noticed that the number was a little bit higher than last Friday.

[Today's park attendance: 3,573. (59,137 from goal) / 2 days left.]

It was Saturday, the day of the match.

The staff's tireless efforts, along with the park's all-night support, had somehow gotten everything ready to receive the crowds before noon. Every single member of the cast had stayed overnight. Isuzu herself had slept for just two hours, and hadn't had a shower in twelve. She really did feel like she wanted to die.

The park opened, and attendance was good. The weather was nice, too. Moffle and the others met the guests in Entrance Square, and smiles abounded.

If you only looked onstage, it would have seemed like nothing more than a busier-than-usual Saturday morning for the park. It was hard to imagine that tens of thousands would soon be flooding through that gate.

Just after lunch, then, something strange began: A group of people in yellow and blue uniforms piled off a bus. These must be the Melody Shibasaki fans. They looked all around, saw the clearly marked guide signs, then headed through the front gate and towards the second park.

Some seemed to be griping about the sudden change of venue, but one could be overheard, saying with a smile, "It's better than canceling it."

"They're here..." Muse said as she ran up to Isuzu, who was waiting near the gate.

"More will come," Isuzu told her. "We need them to."

More fans did come. Their numbers grew rapidly, faster and faster. They passed through the gate, and then followed the marked route towards the second park.

Dozens became hundreds. Hundreds became thousands. Every bus that they could get from the city was here, carrying fans from the special parking lots in droves. Groups of people in colorful shirts got off, split up into groups based on

their teams, and whooped in excitement as they passed through the gate. Buses had also been sent to Kajinomoto Stadium to pick up any fans who hadn't heard about the switch. Moving things just one city over had paid off, because there was almost no confusion at all.

"Incredible," Muse said.

The staff and cast on crowd control duty shouted, and the baggage search team (deployed for saturation tactics) filtered the fans through swiftly. The front gate, quiet enough that morning that you could hear birdsong, was now consumed with an earthquake-like roar.

She was stunned. "I've never seen a crowd like this outside of Ariake..."

"I won't ask what event you attended there," Isuzu said to her, "but... this park probably hasn't seen a crowd like this in over 20 years."

The gate counter was ticking up at an incredible rate. Many of the fans had decided to spend the time before the match looking around the park, and the unprecedented number of guests had the cast at their wits' end. The various concessions, selling out of food and drinks quickly due to the 30 yen campaign, were forced to tap into the next day's reserves.

Every street was overflowing with people. The attractions were running at full tilt, with no time for anyone to rest. The health center—for guests who weren't feeling well—was almost at capacity. This also led to a proportional increase in guest complaints, and the attempts to respond to them had led to sheer chaos.

Isuzu was constantly on the move. She had been hoping to find enough free time for a shower, but the moment just never appeared. She felt so sick she wanted to die, but—she also felt so motivated to live!

A brass band played on the grand avenue. Muse and the others danced to wild cheers. The children were kicking the hell out of Macaron. Tiramii had passed out. Wanipii was in a corner, skipping out on work. The rest of the cast were all running around, making merry.

Things onstage were so busy that most of the park staff didn't have time to look in on the stadium itself. Then, all of a sudden, the people in the soccer shirts were gone, a sign that the match was about to begin.

The sun had gone low in the west, and the eastern sky had gone dark, when they heard the first sound of cheers and drums echoing from the second park. The stadium, which had sat stagnant and dark in the forest for twenty years, was now ablaze in the twilight. The match must have started without a hitch.

Having a free moment at last, Isuzu stood on the now-empty grand avenue, watching as the stadium brimmed with life from afar. She didn't know how to describe what she felt. It wasn't simple relief, or joy. It was a more complicated feeling—alienation, perhaps?

Like a child forced to watch at a distance while the other children played; that was the closest thing she could think of.

"All those people having the time of their lives out there... we're not the reason they came, fumo." Suddenly, Moffle was beside her. He'd been so occupied with stage shows and souvenir pictures in the House of Sweets that she hadn't seen him all day.

He was also gazing at that distant stadium. "If this were a concert, we'd be the warm-up act. Right now, that's the best we can offer to anyone. Nothing's changed. ...Nothing's changed at all, fumo."

The next thing she knew, the rest of the cast were there, too.

They had all stopped what they were doing to stare silently at the stadium. In their eyes shone the same lonely light as Isuzu's.

The match ended in a draw, 2-2: it had, apparently, been a good match. The fans went home satisfied, and the park closed. It was around midnight by the time they'd finished cleaning up the stadium.

Everyone was exhausted, but most of the cast had stuck around. That much was understandable; of course they couldn't sleep until they'd learned the day's attendance figure.

They'd been using the employee cafeteria as a staging area for the day, and the cast had dragged themselves there once again, exhausted. Latifah was with them.

A leaden silence hung over the room as Seiya entered.

“I have the results,” he began, then checked the paper scrap he’d written it on again just to be sure. “53,449. In other words, we’re just 5,688 people short. Tomorrow’s a Sunday, and there’s a zero percent chance of precipitation. Given our attendance this past week... it’s almost certain we’ll get what we need.”

As Seiya concluded, the group remained silent. It was like they hadn’t fully absorbed the meaning of his words.

“What’s wrong with you people?” he demanded. “It means the park gets to stay in business.”

There were a few more seconds of silence, and then nearly everyone rocketed to their feet, cheering in joy. Their cheers sounded like shrieking.

“We did it! We did it! We did it!” Muse and Latifah shouted, holding hands and crying as they jumped up and down.

“A miracle, ron! It really is a miracle, ron!” Macaron said, manly tears streaming from his eyes.

“I don’t have to say goodbye to the ladies, mii!” Tiramii cried out as he tapped on his smartphone.

“Kanie-san! I, Tricen, burst with admiration! I am compelled to hunch over in tears!” Tricen bowed to him, his shoulders trembling.

Wanipii was gazing up at the ceiling, tears streaking down his cheeks. Wrenchy-kun patted him on the shoulder and nodded solemnly. The rest of the cast was ecstatic: clapping their hands, banging on their chairs, dancing on the tables... a few were even doing backflips.



“Incidentally, the stadium attendance today suggests 43,217 of them were soccer fans. That means 10,232 people came here for the park itself,” Seiya commented offhandedly. “Even if it took bargain basement ticket prices, you still broke 10,000. You know... that’s nice work for a crummy amusement park.”

A new, louder round of applause and cheers filled the cafeteria. In their excitement, someone suggested tossing Seiya into the air. Seiya awkwardly turned them down, then addressed the group again: “Okay, that’s enough! You’re all dismissed! We still have one day left, so go home and get some rest!”

He waved, but before leaving the cafeteria proper, he approached Latifah. She was standing there with Isuzu’s help, with a serene smile on her face. “Kanie-sama. I truly... I truly must thank you.”

“Come on,” he scoffed. “It was just a coincidence.”

“No,” she protested, “I am certain that it was—”

“A miracle? Sure, that’s what we’ll tell people,” Seiya said, then immediately regretted it.

Latifah’s smile vanished immediately. Her brows knitted in quiet sadness, as if she’d figured something out... but then she went right back to her original smile. “Yes, let us tell them that.”

“I’d better go now,” he excused himself. “Good work today.”

“Yes,” Latifah said gently. “I greatly appreciate all that you have done.”

Isuzu met Seiya’s eyes for a moment. She looked like she wanted to say something, but was choosing to refrain for now.

“You hear me? You people need to go home and get some sleep!” Seiya bellowed at the cast. He turned his back on the still ebullient cafeteria, but as he proceeded into the dark hall, he ran right into Moffle.

The mascot was leaning against the wall, a mournful air about him. “It’s over, huh, fumo?”

“Yeah. The fate of the park is in your hands again,” Seiya noted. “Do whatever you want with it.”

“Sorry,” Moffle said.

“Hey, no problem...”

Two men who had spent the last two days pensive and listless. Two men who weren't in any kind of mood to celebrate the “miracle.” They both stood now in the otherwise empty hall, faces ashen.

Anyone who saw us like this would guess the truth immediately, Seiya thought. Which is that this wasn't a miracle at all.

Seiya thought back on what had happened three days before.



There was no way to get them to their target number. Seiya had immediately come to that conclusion on the morning after he'd taken the job of acting manager.

Nothing they could do would change anything. Even if he made everything free, even if he dumped their *entire budget* into advertising, it simply wasn't going to happen. There was no way to bring in the kind of numbers they needed in just two weeks.

He could put up a good fight, but that was all it would be; you would need magic to make something like that happen in such a short time.

The only reason he'd stuck around, groping for possibilities, was because he wasn't emotionally invested in the park, yet. If he had been, he would have thrown in the towel immediately.

His first ray of hope had appeared the day Muse took him to see the stadium. It was a symbol of the wasteful bubble economy; a towering monument to excess, which lingered on in an age of recession.

He didn't know what the park's previous administrations had been like, but it seemed strange that they'd kept the stadium up and running all this time.

He returned to his office to look through his documents, and found an old contract with Kajinomoto Stadium. It was just a few lines of text—easy to overlook, under normal circumstances: “In the event of an unexpected forced closure of Kajinomoto Stadium, we hereby offer the use of the stadium located

in Amagi Brilliant Park's second park (planned) free of charge," it read.

What month was it now? March.

What Kajinomoto Stadium event was coming up soon? A J1 opening game. Melody Shibasaki, a team that had just advanced to the J1 League, would be playing the Kurawa Mets, a team that had placed highly in the previous season. It was a match that would draw a lot of interest.

They'd pull 40,000 people at least. If Seiya wanted the park to survive, he was going to have to take advantage of that.

That was why he'd tasked Wrenchy-kun to start fixing up the old stadium, holding firmly against any objections. He needed it to be ready to hold between 40,000 and 50,000 people at any time.

Now, all he needed was a "forced closure" at Kajinomoto Stadium, but he couldn't count on a fire just happening to occur.

Most of Seiya's internal conflict over the course of the next week was questioning how far he was willing to go—a battle with what little conscience he had left. It was in the kitchen, when Latifah was making her croquettes, that he'd shaken off the last of his hesitation.

On Wednesday night, Seiya returned home, stuffed the tools he'd prepared in advance into his backpack, then headed for Kajinomoto Stadium.

He'd spent the week memorizing the stadium's layout, its electrical system, and more. He'd gone over various infiltration routes, then chosen the most reliable location and method. There would be a few locks between him and his destination, but those would be easy enough to break through with an over-the-counter lock picking kit.

Then, just a tiny bit of meddling with the electrical system would make it look like the fire had started naturally. Whether or not it would fool a professional investigator, of course, would come down to the luck of the draw.

The trouble was that, in order to use the route he'd chosen, he'd have to walk a fifty meter tightrope across an eight meter tall fence—and Seiya had acrophobia.

He made his move after midnight. He'd spent over an hour, inching his way over an unmonitored fence, in a pitch-black stadium—an hour that felt like an eternity.

After clinging his way over the fence, he finally arrived at the door to the electrical room... when, just then, he heard Moffle's voice behind him: "Seems like you went to a lot of trouble, fumo." Basically, it was only pure luck that kept Seiya from crying out in shock.

What is Moffle doing here? he wondered. *What does he want? How did he get here?* As Seiya's mouth flapped in astonishment, Moffle thrust a paw at him. "I followed you, fumo. Simple business for a former member of Maple Land's strike recon squad."

You really do have some history... Seiya thought. And what the hell kind of squad was that?

"Wrenchy-kun told me about your secret work on the stadium in the second park, fumo. Then I found myself remembering that old contract," Moffle explained. "I had an inkling of what you were planning, but I never thought you'd really be this stupid..."

"Nobody asked you," Seiya told him.

Seiya pulled the lock pick kit out of his backpack and huddled up by the door to the electrical room. He'd bought himself a similar kind of cylinder lock, and had spent the last few days practicing on it. It might take a bit of time, but he should be able to break through...

"Stop this," Moffle told him. "What you're about to do is a real crime, fumo."

"I know that," Seiya said absently.

"It's not just the stadium you'll be making trouble for," Moffle accused him. "It's a number of companies, and all kinds of people. They'll lose a lot of money over this. They're not just going to let you walk away, fumo."

"I know." Seiya stopped for a minute, then laughed through his nose.

"No one'll be happy to know that the park got saved this way. We'd be better off out in the street, fumo!"

“And then what will happen to her?!” Seiya grabbed Moffle by his bow tie and dragged him close, face to face.

Moffle seemed shocked by his sudden aggression.

“She told me everything,” Seiya snarled at him. “She can’t survive without the park. If this was just about keeping some crummy amusement park going, I wouldn’t go this far, either. I’ve been torturing myself about this. I tried thinking of other ways. But none of them were going to work, so this is what it has to be!”

“Moffu...”

“You told me not to do this,” Seiya continued, “but is that all you have to say? You say you care about her too, but what have you done to keep things from coming to this? Heh... working on your art? Giving your all to the guests? That didn’t work. It wasn’t enough!”

He must have hit him where it hurt, because Moffle immediately deflated. He took an unsteady step back, and lowered his eyes.

“Dirty tricks are what we need right now,” Seiya said flatly, then turned back to the lock. “I’m doing this rotten thing of my own free will, not asking for anyone’s permission.”

“Why do you care so much, fumo?” Moffle asked him.

“...I remembered.”

Ten years ago, Seiya had come to Amagi Brilliant Park. He had probably been about five or six. He’d visited the amusement park with his parents—back when they still got along—and enjoyed the various attractions. He didn’t remember Moffle, but there was one person in the cast that he did remember. *Latifah*. She had been a girl of 14 or 15 back then, just as she was now. Seiya had gotten separated from his parents, and somehow ended up lost backstage. Then, by coincidence, he had ended up straying into the rooftop garden.

She was there in a corner, crying. *Why are you crying?* he had asked her. He couldn’t remember what she had said in response. Probably something about her curse, or about being lonely... Then, he did a dance he’d just learned to make her smile, and he said to her: *I’m with you. I will save you...*

“...I met Latifah a long time ago,” Seiya said, still working on the lock. “I was just a little kid. She was in that rooftop garden, looking just like she does now, for some reason... I didn’t know what was going on, but the point is, I met her. And I made her a promise that I would save her.”

“I see, fumo...” Moffle breathed. “...I do remember an incident some time back. A child wandering into the rooftop garden... We’ve improved security since then, of course...”

“Then I guess my memory’s not wrong,” Seiya said flatly.

Almost there, he thought. The lock was almost open. He felt a satisfying click, and then carefully turned the tools. After a moment’s resistance, the cylinder popped open.

...Got it. Seiya packed up his kit, and then pulled out the wiring diagram and flashlight he’d brought along. The substrate of the distribution boards in the back of the room should be old and worn. It shouldn’t take much meddling to start a fire...

But, just before he entered the room, he felt a hard strike from Moffle’s paw against the back of the head, and he toppled over. “Kanie Seiya. I just can’t let you do this, fumo.”

“Ngh...” Seiya groaned. *You damned idiot*, he thought. *Are you just going to abandon her, then?* He tried to shout, but his voice wouldn’t come out. His arms and legs were tingling, but he couldn’t move them.

“Let me tell you one thing, fumo,” Moffle said. “Latifah’s curse doesn’t just make her weaker. It’s something far worse than that, fumo.”

A worse curse than that? But what on earth could it—

“It resets her physical development and memories every year, fumo. She’s been 14 years old for over ten years now,” Moffle explained. “Every spring, she loses all memory of the previous year, fumo. So no matter what you do, she’s going to forget about you soon.”

Ah... Seiya realized. So that was why the Latifah he remembered from his childhood looked the same as the one from now...

Moffle let out a sigh. “I thought that even if the park closed, I could take Latifah with me and eke out a living as a street performer,” he confessed. “Maybe we wouldn’t have lasted long, but... it seemed to me, maybe that’s fate, fumo.”

Seiya said nothing, and waited for Moffle to finish his thoughts.

“But, I’ve changed my mind. To fade away gracefully is all well and good... but a little ungainly struggling isn’t the worst thing in the world. Before, you asked me... wasn’t there more I could have done before things came to this? You were right. Right on the money. I should have... we should have done something, fumo.”

Moffle picked up Seiya’s tools and the blueprints. “Kanie Seiya. It’s wrong to make you pay our debts for us, fumo. So if ‘dirty tricks are what we need right now’... then I ought to be the one doing them.”

Moffle headed for the back of the electric room.

The work wasn’t anything too difficult. You just had to follow the marks he’d made on the diagram, contacting the batteries linked by the series to cause an overload. Then, the dusty circuit’s vinyl would start to burn, and the damage would quickly spread. Sparks began to fly in the back of the room, and a foul burning smell reached Seiya’s nose.

“All right. Let’s make a break for it, fumo.” Moffle hefted the immobilized Seiya onto his shoulder, then took off with surprising swiftness.



The cast, having ignored the command to go home, were still celebrating in the dining hall. None of them noticed Seiya and Moffle—the partners in crime—talking in the dark hallway.

“The idea of resorting to dirty tricks... I’d been afraid it would cast a pall over my art, fumo,” Moffle confessed.

“Well... that’s understandable,” Seiya said, sympathizing.

“But what’s done is done, fumo. I’ll just have to keep doing my best,” Moffle said, then gave a finalizing shrug. “Well, will today be the end of it, fumo?”

He was referring to Seiya's time as acting manager. Seiya's absence wouldn't affect tomorrow's attendance at all; his work here was done.

"Good question," Seiya mused. "Maybe I'll spend tomorrow in my room working through my game backlog... No, no. I've come this far; I should at least be here for the end."

"Right," Moffle agreed neutrally. "I'm sure they'll all be happy to see you, fumo."

Seiya found himself wincing. "Well, good work today."

"Moffu. Thank you, Seiya."

They waved to each other, avoiding each other's eyes, and then went their separate ways.

[Today's park attendance: 53,449. (5,688 from goal) / 1 day left.]

The next day was Sunday, and Seiya slept until noon.

His Aunt Aisu was up then, for once, so they ate some pasta and spaced out, watching golf on TV. Seiya had thought about playing some video games, but he just couldn't muster the enthusiasm for it.

The weather outside was clear. It was still a bit chilly, given the time of year, but the sunlight was warm.

Around the time that the evening 'classic family anime' aired, Seiya was getting ready to head out. Aisu, munching on a rice cracker, asked him, "Where are you going at this hour?"

"Work," he told her shortly.

"Ahh," his aunt responded, showing no further sign of interest.

He wasn't sure if he'd be able to catch a bus back or not, so he decided to ride his bike there; it only took him about 30 minutes. He passed through the employee entrance and greeted the now familiar face of the security guard. "How's attendance?"

"It's great," the security guard told him. "Looks to be higher than last week,

I'd say."

Seiya was relieved to hear that. He'd had a nagging fear that they'd make some kind of mistake that would tank their attendance.

He wandered around backstage, waving to the various cast members who called to him, smiling. *It's been a strange two weeks, hasn't it?* he reflected. *We hated each other so much before, but look at us now...*

Seiya had never fit in at school. But now, after much trial and tribulation, he felt, for the first time, that he'd found a place where he could feel at home.

Closing time would come shortly. The day's attendance was an incredible 12,430, breaking 10,000 for the second day in a row. Once all the guests were gone, the news was broadcast over the park's internal speakers. All the employees clapped their hands and cheered.

Cast members whose names Seiya didn't even know, but who happened to be standing nearby, asked him for handshakes. He obliged, and told them "great work," with an awkward smile.

Mission officially accomplished, he thought later, as he walked alone down the underground hallway. Just then, the sound of theatrical applause rang out behind him. *Clap, clap, clap*, came the empty, hollow sound.

"Well, well. Excellent work." Seiya turned to see Kurisu Takaya of Amagi Development standing in the hallway; he must have come to confirm the final day's attendance for himself. There was a visitor's ID hanging from his neck.

"I can't believe you really brought in 100,000 people," Kurisu remarked. "I'm shocked."

"...Why are you talking to me about it?" Seiya asked him suspiciously. "You should be talking to whomever put the hard work in."

"Oh, please." Kurisu smiled. "You might as well drop the act. The hard work was all yours, wasn't it? Kanie Seiya-kun... Or should I say... the acting manager chosen by the revelation?"

".....!" It was impossible for Seiya to hide his shock.

He wasn't especially surprised that Kurisu knew he was the acting manager; if

he had an informant in the park, he surely would have heard about it. But to know about the revelation...

Seeming to derive pleasure from Seiya's reaction, Kurisu spoke up again. "You've successfully extended the park's lifespan by one year. But that's about all you've done... You can't keep the discount campaign going for a whole year. All you've done is given a dying patient a shot of adrenaline."

"...What are you getting at?" Seiya asked him flatly.

"The park will meet its fate eventually, one way or another," Kurisu said scornfully. "And the cursed princess, to whom you're so attached, will die a dog's death."

He knows about Latifah's curse? Seiya wondered to himself. *Why? Who the hell is this man—*

"Who are you?" he asked out loud. Seiya argued with himself until the very last second over whether to use his mind-reading magic. But no, this wasn't the time yet—using it now would be the wrong choice, his logical mind insisted.

"Oh?" Kurisu mocked him. "Not going to use your magic, hmm? You have impressive self-control."

Seiya barely stopped himself from letting out a groan. *What's going on here? He knows about my magic!*

The man laughed. "If you know about her curse, then you can surely imagine... 'The evil magician, cornered by the noble general, threw himself off a cliff...' But nobody ever said that the magician was *dead*."

"Are you saying..." Seiya began to ask.

Kurisu smiled. It was a cunning, wicked smile. "...To be honest, I'd been hoping to deliver the finishing blow this year," he confessed. "But now, I've changed my mind. I won't tell anyone about the stadium incident. For now, I'd like to sit back, watch and observe... how far can this rotten amusement park go with another year?"

"This is crazy! She hasn't done anything wrong! You just—" Seiya shouted angrily, reaching out to grab Kurisu by the lapels. As he did, the image of the

man in the suit blurred.

“If it makes you this angry, why not stay with it?” The air around them warped, and in the ceiling, lights flickered. “Unsightly decline and collapse,” his voice intoned in a low roar. “The irreversible flow of the era in which we live. You can attempt to defy them if you wish... but the *ager* which you’re protecting is fated to wither and die—and I wish to watch it happen.”

The thing that flickered before his eyes, now, was not some company administrator. It was something else, grinning and mocking him—and them.

“Kanie-kun, stand back,” a familiar voice commanded him.

“Sento?” he asked, completely bewildered.

At some point, Isuzu had arrived. She pushed Seiya out of the way and took aim with her gun. She fired, and there was a blinding flash. When it had faded, Kurisu Takaya was gone without a trace.

“Ugh...” Seiya looked around, rubbing his throbbing head.

They were alone now, but Isuzu kept her musket at the ready, her senses on high alert. “...He got away,” she lamented.

“Who the hell was that guy?” Seiya wondered out loud.

“At the very least, he doesn’t appear to be a mortal,” Isuzu mused thoughtfully.

She must have also called for backup, because Moffle arrived a little bit later, knocking over trash cans and raging. “So it was him!” the mascot fumed. “Dammit! Next time, I’ll kill him, fumo!”

Several hours later, Seiya was talking to Latifah in the rooftop garden. “I’m going to stick with it,” he told her.

She tilted her head in incomprehension. “...May I ask what you mean?”

“The acting manager position,” he explained. “I’m going to stick with it through next year. And, actually... I think I’ll hang around until the problem is solved.”

She probably had her curse explained to her every year, because she seemed to have realized what that meant. “Kanie-sama...”

“Don’t look at me like that,” he told her. “It’s because I made a promise.”

“A... promise?” she asked, her voice uncertain.

“Yeah. I hope you remember someday.” A lonely smile appeared on Seiya’s face.

[Today’s park attendance: 12,430. (6,742 over goal) / Term complete.]

Epilogue

It was the first day of April, and it really felt like spring.

It was morning, just before the park opened. After announcing a few general policy directives for the new year, Seiya gave more detailed explanations to the various department heads about their upcoming direction. Then, he headed to the rooftop garden.

Latifah was waiting there as usual.

No... not “as usual,” he reminded himself; to her, this would be their first meeting.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. Ah... Kanie Seiya-sama,” she greeted him awkwardly.

“Yeah. A pleasure to meet you,” Seiya said, although his smile was strained.

“I have heard a great deal about you,” she continued. “I am told that last year, you saved the park from a truly desperate situation.”

She doesn't remember it anymore, he realized with regret. The last few weeks, her telling me about the revelation and kissing me, the promise I made to her all those years ago... It's all been reset.

Her manner, too, while not exactly cold, was reticent.

“I'm not any kind of savior, but... I'll do what I can,” Seiya said. “I look forward to working with you.” A feeling of indescribable sadness whispered through him.

“Yes, I feel the same way,” she told him with a polite smile.



After leaving the garden behind, Seiya was heading for his office, in the general affairs building, when he spotted a commotion in the PR department office. It was Isuzu, Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii, and murder seemed to hang in the air.

“What’s going on here?” he wanted to know.

“Ahh... Kanie-kun,” Isuzu greeted him. “We’ve been discussing cast profiles for the park’s official website.”

“And..?” he said, pressing for more information.

“We’re encountered a variety of problems,” she explained. “Moffle’s ‘favorite food’ entry, for instance—he won’t offer anything except croquettes.”

Moffle let out a snort. “Well, it’s the truth, fumo. Croquettes are the best. My favorites lately are the snack croquettes sold at a place called ‘Saigo-tei’ in Komazawa and Nakano.”

“But you’re the Fairy of Sweets, aren’t you?” Isuzu demanded. “Besides, there’s already a mascot character in a famous manga who loves croquettes. It’s been done.”

“Rrgh...” Moffle groaned. “Then make it dorayaki, fumo.”

“That’s also been done,” she pointed out. “It’s the favorite food of a character well known to everyone in Japan.”

“Grrr...”

“Then there’s Tiramii,” Isuzu moved on. “For ‘dislikes,’ you put ‘mice.’ That’s unacceptable. It’s extremely famous as the ‘dislike’ of the character I mentioned before.”

“B-But I really don’t like them, mii!” Tiramie bleated in protest. “I was at this run-down pub in Shimo-kitazawa when I ran into this brown rat as big as a cat! It was traumatic, mii!” Tiramii’s whole body floofed up in fear. Moffle gave him a sideways glance, but he ignored it.

“Nevertheless, mice are off the table,” Isuzu said dismissively. “It’s been done.”

“Ugh...”

“Also, Macaron,” she said, coming to the last of her victims. “Under ‘special skills’ you put ‘building Gundam models.’ But, surely you jest?”

Macaron puffed up in annoyance. “B-But I *am* good at that, ron! I can build a Master Grade without instructions! I’ve even got Ebikawa Kanetake’s autograph, ron!”

“There’s another character who’s famous for building Gundam models,” Isuzu told him pointedly. “You know, Sergeant such-and-such. It’s been done. Request denied.”

“Oh, come on...”

Seiya, watching passively, managed to intuit what the issue was. But as Isuzu seemed to have things well in hand, he could probably afford to stay out of it.

Just then, the three mascots united in protest.

“You’re just mean, mii! All you say is ‘it’s been done, it’s been done!’”

“Yeah! These things are what make us who we are, fumo.”

“If anything’s ‘been done’ around here, it’s that weapon of yours, ron!”

“I...” Isuzu flinched at his accusation.

“That’s right, mii!” Tiramii accused scornfully. “A musket? Please! Give us a break!”

“Moffu,” Moffle agreed. “It’s right out of that recent hit ‘magical girl’ show...”

“Yeah, yeah! That masterpiece!” Macaron enthused. “I have the whole series on blu-ray, ron!”

They chorused in unison, “It’s been done!”

“...Ngh.” Isuzu lowered her eyes, shoulders trembling, but the three kept at her: “The three of us at least can hide it, fumo. But muskets, you know...”

“As a major visual element? Pretty pathetic, ron...”

“It’s like a failed pinup idol trying to rack up hits by cosplaying a character she barely knows, mii.”

“Easy there, Sento...” Seiya cautioned. “You guys knock it off too.”

But it was too late for Seiya to stop it. Tears forming at the corners of her eyes, Isuzu pulled out the weapon in question. “Then I’ll show you the power of this ‘been done’ weapon!” she shouted.

“Stop i—” he started to protest. She fired.

Macaron got hit by a “pain of stubbing your little toe on the dresser” bullet, and fell to the floor in agony. Horrified, Moffle and Tiramii tried to flee, but Isuzu kept firing relentlessly. Tricen, who was just passing by, got hit by a stray shot. Tiramii used Seiya as a shield, but Isuzu kept firing...

Maybe I should have jumped ship after two weeks after all... Seiya thought to himself in exasperation. A whole year with these people? It was ridiculous!

Seiya threw himself prostrate on the floor, as the office became a war zone, already regretting what he had taken on.

-The End-

Afterword

This all started a little over five years ago.

I've never had any particular attachment to amusement parks, but I went to a famous theme park as part of a social outing. As I was watching a family playing around with the mascots, an idea struck me: *Wouldn't it be funny if that duck character hated kids? What if they really hated children, but since it's their job, they just have to spend the day grinning and bearing it? Then, at the end of their shift, they go unwind at some local pub or something...*

The moment the idea entered my mind, I started to feel a strange affinity for that duck character. Even when I just caught a glimpse of him on TV commercials, I thought "Ah, I bet he's having a rough time, too."

For a grown man like me, who prefers more edgy entertainments, a family-oriented theme park can seem really boring. That's always when I get my most mean-spirited ideas. Thinking back, I used to fantasize about things like "What if a terrorist suddenly took over the school?!" as a method of escaping from reality. But there are good ideas lurking in that escapism.

That idea of "a mascot who hates children" stayed in my mind for a long time. Some jerk who's unsatisfied with his daily life, going through work in a funk every day, badmouthing the customers backstage all the time... I haven't put any such child-hating mascots in *Amagi Brilliant Park*, but that idea grew into the image of a crummy amusement park over the years.

It's been 18 years since I first became a writer, and when you've been working in entertainment for as long as I have, you get to thinking about a lot of things. There are things I complain about, and things that make me happy. I understand the anguish of the people who don't sell, and I understand the hardships of the people who do. I figure that's probably the same in any business. Those mascots we see playing happily with children every day probably have their own grievances and their own rewards, right?

It was from that feeling that this series developed.

Thinking back on my career up until now, I always thought it was best to write grand military epics with lots of crazy action. But I realized I can still do those stories when I'm older, so maybe I should try this while I still can. That was how it started. There's been a lot of trial and error involved, but I think I got it out? (I'm still a little scared, to be honest.) This first volume is a long-form story with a ticking clock, but I think the second volume will be more about the crazy shenanigans that the employees of this crummy park get up to day by day.

They'll be a little less heavy, a little more like weird stories about someone's part-time job.

...After I finished writing it, I realized the closest thing to this I've written was the *Horai Gakuen* anthology I wrote as my debut work. If you're going to tell weird stories, I guess it's best to do it with male characters.

When I started writing my story, I did interviews with people involved in a certain top theme park. I heard a lot of stories that aren't public, so I can't reveal any names here, but it was very educational. Thank you so much.

This is also just the first volume, so I didn't have time to use everything I learned, but I'm sure it'll pay off some day.

In the volume, Moffle and the others do a lot of criticizing of a certain first-rate park, but keep in mind that those are just the careless remarks of people who don't know what first-rate park workers go through. I'd like to illustrate that conflict at some point, too.

I also lifted the design of secondary protagonist Moffle from Bonta-kun, the mascot from my own *Full Metal Panic!* series. I just couldn't get away from picturing him as Bonta-kun. I'm very grateful to Shiki Douji-san for agreeing to let me use the original Bonta-kun design in a totally different book.

And of course, I'm very grateful to Nakajima Yuka-san for handling the illustrations this time around. It was a very difficult job, but thank you for creating such appealing characters. The schedule for the next volume is harsh, but I'll do my best!

Lastly, to Morii-kun from Fujimi Shobo and my manager Narukawa-san, thank you both very much. I'm sorry everything's late all the time (sweats). I'll try to do better next time.

Well, I hope we'll see each other again soon.

See you later!

Shouji Gatou

January 2013

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Nakajima Yuka





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